

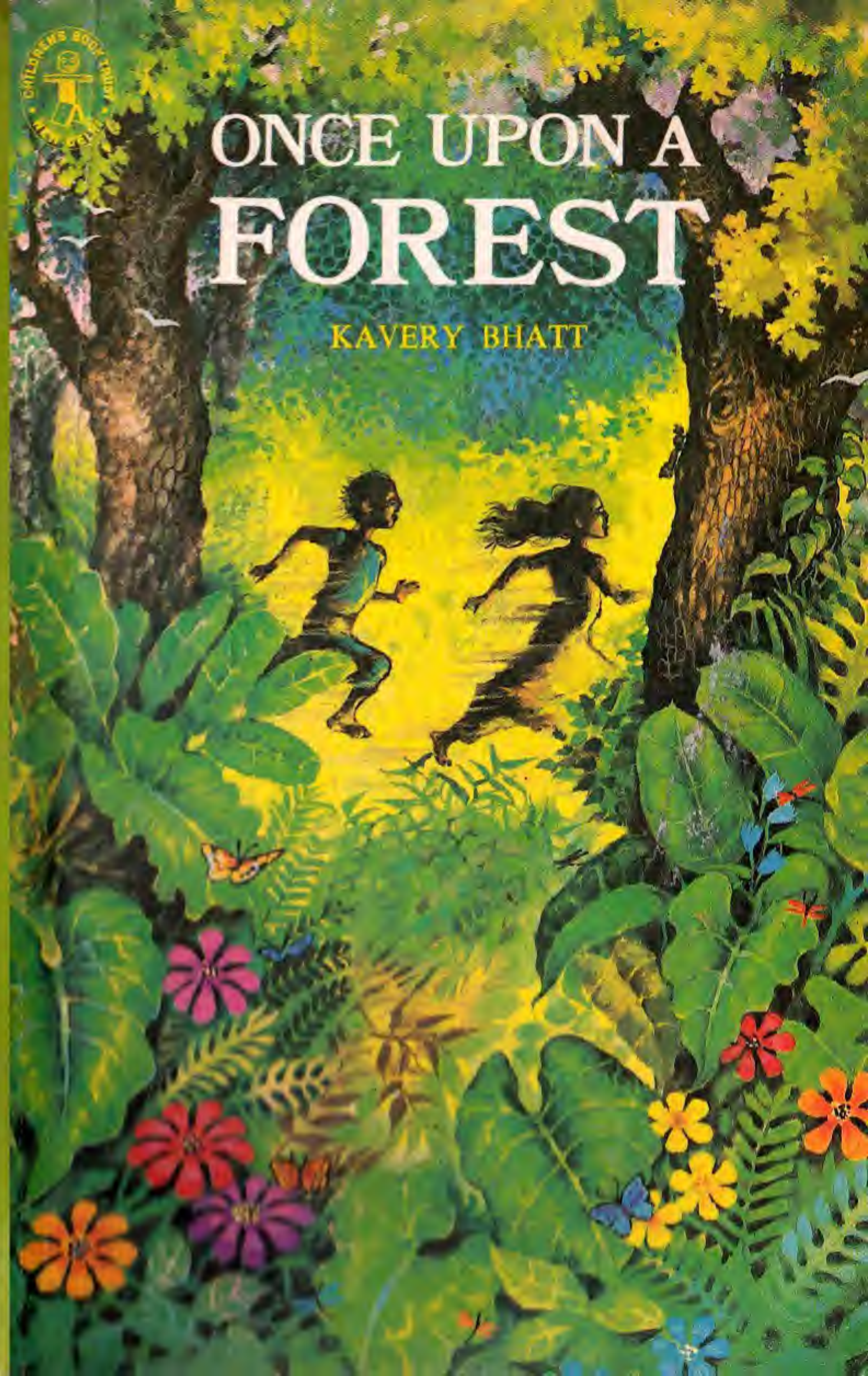
From afar came the sound of wolves howling. It was pitch dark. Dilip shuddered and hoped the others had not heard. He was the eldest among six children, Sunita, Vinay, Laila, Soorie and Viji, lost in a forest, with a dauntless uncle who lay twisted and helpless in a pit.

Many hazards came their way. The calm and courage with which they tide over one crisis after another make an exciting saga, in which the girls and boys are matched superbly.



ONCE UPON A FOREST

KAVERY BHATT



The author, Dr. (Mrs.) Kavery Bhatt is a surgeon and has written *The Cuckoo Clock* published by CBT.



Published by Children's Book Trust, Nehru House, 4 Bahadur Shah Zafar Marg, New Delhi, and printed at the Trust's Press, the Indraprastha Press, New Delhi

Ready, get set . . .

SOORIE was wide awake at 4.30 a.m. when the shrill sound of the alarm clock splintered through his thoughts. He sprang out of bed, seized the clock and shoved it under the pillow, all in one quick movement. Having smothered its shrill sound, he tiptoed past his parent's bedroom towards the toilet.

"Soorie! Back to bed. It's still night do you hear? Night!"

"But Dad..."

"Get back to bed!"

With a deep sigh, Soorie went back to his room and closed the door. Fine camping trip it was going to be, if a chap could not even get himself ready early in the morning. How could they sleep their heads off on a day like this? It wasn't like any other day. But that is grown-ups for you. Most unpredictable. Here he was, all set for his first camping trip and they didn't even care.

Soorie was an energetic, busy sort of boy, the sort that could not sit still and do nothing. He looked at his bulging rucksack on the floor, all packed and ready. Better look through once more, just in case. Soorie untied the dark green straps and the contents

oozed out like tooth paste. When a nine-year old embarks on his first camping trip, he remembers to take an awful lot of things.

Bird Observation Book, magnifying glass, binoculars, bits of string, pencil and so on. A good camper is well prepared for any eventuality.

There was a familiar scratch and scuffle at the door. Soorie opened it just a little to let in Chow, his smart black and grey dog. Chow gave Soorie a 'good morning' lick, glanced at the rucksack on the floor and drooped mournfully over his front paw. He knew he was not going.

"Can't do anything about it Chow, so don't pull such a long face," said Soorie. He knew the dog felt miserable. He decided to make one last effort to take Chow along to the Camp. Soorie could not understand what everyone had against Chow. A habitual heel-snapper, but otherwise most well behaved.

"Are you hungry, Chow? I am." With the dog at his heels, Soorie tiptoed past his parents' bedroom into the kitchen and opened the fridge. "We're in luck! Two cutlets here. One for you and one for me."

"Soorie!"

It was his mother at the door in her dressing gown. "Eating cutlets at this time," she fumed, "and wasting them on that greedy dog. You are impossible! Close the fridge and go back to your room."

'There will be peace for two whole days while he is away at the camp,' she thought, looking at her son. 'Sheer bliss to have a quiet weekend with plenty of time to sit back and watch television.'

"Get yourself ready, son," she said. "You can have an early breakfast before you go."

* * *

Vinay was not an early riser. He loved his sleep. Viji had to tug at his blanket to wake him up. He grumbled his way to the toilet, dowsed his face in cold water, then suddenly brightened up.

"Say, it is the big day, isn't it?"

"It won't be, if you don't hurry," said Viji. She pulled the blue sweater over her head and readjusted her spectacles. Except for the spectacles, Viji and Vinay were identical twins—high-cheek bones, broad brow and short straight hair. But inside, no two persons could be more unlike one another.

Vinay changed quickly and then went through the movements of combing his unruly hair. He had looked forward so much to this day and talked about it for months, yet now he was feeling uneasy. It was something he could not put his finger on.

Then, he remembered. It was Smita. Smita, that hoity-toity friend of Viji's who was coming with them to the Camp.

"She will spoil the fun. I know she will," he grumbled, lacing his tough canvas shoes. "It was a dumb idea to invite her."

Viji knew why Vinay disliked Smita. She was the best All Rounder of their class and Vinay was jealous. It was silly, really.

"You will be nice to her, Vinay," she warned, her eyes severe behind the spectacles. "I won't have you insulting my friend."

"Some friend."

"My friend is my friend. Just because *you* don't like her ..."

"I don't like her dainty-dainty ways."

"Shut up."

"Less noise you two!"

It was their Uncle Dev, stooping his six-foot-two-inch frame at the door. He knew the twins well enough to realise that once they began to scrap, it was difficult to stop them.

"Have your breakfast quick and haul the camping gear to the front," he said. "Your friends should be along soon and then we will be on our way."

In a moment of wild impulse, Captain Devendranath had agreed to take the twins and four of their friends on a two-day camping trip to Panali. His sister Mrs. Chandra (the twins' mother) had warned him. "You will regret it Dev, I am sure you will. Two kids are more than a handful, but *six!*"

Capt. Devendranath had promised this trip to the twins months ago. He was an uncommon adult, very optimistic about people. Moreover, he liked adventure and outdoor life just as much as the kids. 'Two days of camping at the Panali Game Reserve will be fun,' he thought as he walked away from the twins' room.

"If Smita comes in one of her flimsy, flouncy outfits..." went on Vinay when Capt. Dev had gone.

* * *

Smita, at that very moment, was standing in front of her full-length mirror in a flimsy, flouncy, lemon-yellow *salwar kameez*. She twirled on her high heels and smiled at her reflection. Smita was long-legged, willowy and very pretty. Posh and poised far beyond her thirteen years. She was thrilled about the camping trip. Only if that awful brother of Viji would stop baiting her.

"You are wearing that for the Camp, Smita?" asked

her father, peeping in at the door. Jeans and canvas shoes would be better."

"Why, don't you like it?" asked Smita, anxiously as she flicked the comb through her long, silky hair once more and pinned it with a matching clip.

"It is stunning," said her father. "But for a camp..."

"Ma has packed my brown canvas shoes, so I can change when I get there," said Smita, sure that she would never change into those horrible shoes. She knew she looked good in the lemon-yellow *salwar kameez*.

Smita Parekh usually got her own way with her parents. She was their only child—beautiful, talented and very spoilt. After a hurried breakfast, she set off towards the twins' home and into trouble.

* * *

"Dileep... ! Dileep... ! Dileep... !"

"Aw, shut up !"

"Breakfast readeee... Huree, Dileep."

"Don't scream Laila," Dilip growled at his plump nine-year old sister. "I am right here in the room, not the other side of town."

Laila was too excited to listen. She pranced about, her pigtailed bouncing and black-button eyes bright and eager. "Do you think we will see elephants, Dileep ? Do you really think we will ?"

'If only I didn't have to take her along,' thought Dilip. He knew Vinay had invited her out of courtesy, just because she was his sister. But really, Laila was the limit. Chatter, chatter, chatter. That was all she did.

"Don't try to stick on to me at the Camp," he warned her. "You jolly well fend for yourself."

Laila nodded, her lower lip drooping. She could not understand why he was so cross with her. Laila adored her elder brother. She was loyal as a puppy and prepared to go to the ends of the earth for him.

Dilip saw that he had hurt her. "Will you get my shoes and socks for me, please?" he asked.

Laila brightened up and dashed off. Dilip took a quick look in the mirror and patted his hair in place. He was a lanky fourteen-year old. Neat, orderly and very conscious of his looks. He was tall for his age and thin. He would soon outstrip his father, everybody said. Dilip liked being tall but when was he going to develop muscles like Capt. Dev ? Drat it, a pimple had sprung up on his nose. It felt bigger than it looked, but it worried him.

Dilip looked through his rucksack to make sure they had taken everything. As an after thought, he put in his favourite book, *Robinson Crusoe*.

* * *

It was a little after eight on that crisp October morning when the kids began to gather round the blue Land Rover parked in front of the Chandra's house.

"Hi, Dilip," Vinay greeted his friend, ignoring his plump little sister.

"Hai, Vinaay !" squealed Laila. "Oooh, let us go ! Where is everybody ?"

Dilip was trying his best to pretend that Laila did not belong to him. He looked at Viji with a side-long glance as he stacked their bags at the back.

"Nice day for camping !" said Viji.

"Uh... Yes."

"Smeeta... ! Smeeta... !"

Vinay swung round and saw the vision in lemon-yellow walk in through the gate, a servant hurrying behind with two huge bags.

"My, my... where's Smita going ?" said Vinay. "It is much too early for a party."

"Shut up !" hissed Viji.

Smita wasn't used to high heels and had awful trouble walking while everyone stared. She could feel herself blush and hoped to goodness they wouldn't notice the lipstick.

"Is there a fashion parade somewhere ?" went on Vinay.

"Vinay Chandra, you mind your own business," snapped Smita.

"It is my business. If you float about like a film star at the Camp, you will frighten the animals."

Smita was furious. "Why did you invite me then?"

"I didn't. Viji did."

That did it.

"I am not coming," said Smita, as tears filled her eyes. "I am not."

"Suit yourself."

Suddenly, everybody was talking.

"Vinay... you beast !"

"Smeeta, don't cry !"

"Uh... girls."

"Q U I E T !"

They turned round and saw Capt. Dev, brows knitted, as he stamped across to them.

Capt. Dev was angry. He had looked forward to this outing as much as the kids but it wouldn't do if they were to behave so badly. He had to handle them right.

"Do you plan to behave like mature young people or like six spoilt brats?" he asked. "Decide for yourselves

and let me know." He swung on his heels and stamped back towards the house.

Six shamefaced children looked at each other in embarrassed silence. Smita bit her lip to stop herself from crying and began to take her bags out of the boot. Laila sniffled but a glare from Dilip silenced her. Vinay shoved his hands into his pockets and leaned against the Land Rover, unrepentant.

Dilip knew that he had to do something fast, or their camping trip was finished even before it started. Vinay as usual had gone too far with his teasing and blown it all.

Dilip cleared his throat and faced Vinay. "What are you waiting for? You started the trouble. You will have to apologise to Smita."

"Apologise? No way," said Vinay stubbornly. He knew full well that he was in the wrong but was in no mood to admit it.

"Be a sport, Vinay, and get it over with," said Dilip earnestly. There was something in the way he said it. Vinay knew he was cornered. He sulked for a while and then walked up to Smita.

"I am sorry," he said. "I was only teasing."

"It is all right," said Smita, with a faint smile. "Let us forget it."

"Come on then, let us call Uncle," said Viji beaming.

They went to the house and assured Capt. Dev that they would be on their best behaviour. The twins' father Dr. Chandra was just setting off to the hospital.

"I have given Viji a well-stocked first-aid box, but I hope you won't need it," he said. "Have a good trip, folks, see you back on Monday."

"I will have lunch ready, so don't be late," said Mrs. Chandra.

As they walked towards the Land Rover, Soorie touched Capt. Dev on the arm. "Can I take Chow, Uncle, please. He is no trouble, really."

Uncle Dev stroked his chin and looked at Soorie. Nine-year old package of trouble, with that quiet naughtiness which was so difficult to iron out. Better without his dog which looked rather like a miniature wolf.

"The dog is out, Soorie," he said firmly. "Each of you check that your things are in. Smita and Soorie sit in front and the rest at the back." He slid into the driver's seat. "It's nine o'clock. Let us get going."

That was Capt. Dev for you. He left you to sort out your things. He would never come messing around saying 'put this here and put this there.'

Soorie knelt down and whispered a sad goodbye to Chow. Then they were off.

On the move

It was Saturday morning, and most shops still had their shutters down as the Land Rover sped through the town towards Panali. The Panali Game Reserve was 260 kms. away. Capt. Dev reckoned it would take five hours of driving and another hour for lunch. 'It will be a good tarred road for about 150 kms.,' his brother-in-law Dr. Chandra had said, 'and then hilly, forest country.' The Land Rover was rugged, built for the job. Capt. Dev relaxed behind the wheel and looked at Smita, who sat quietly by his side. The poor kid was probably still uneasy.

"I heard you are a good sprinter," he said.

Her face lit up. "I am best at five hundred metres. Came first in Interschool Finals."

Capt. Dev whistled his appreciation, "Been camping before?"

"Only on a Girl Guides Day Trip. It was splendid. We built our own fire for cooking and walked ten kms. each way."

"Let us hope we get to see the animals at Panali," said Capt. Dev. "Viji and Vinay have been there before. Vinay tells me the place is crawling with wild animals."

"He always exaggerates," said Smita. "Vinay is the world's greatest fibber."

She felt sorry she had said it. Uncle might think her mean. She wasn't really. It was just that Vinay was an absolute savage at times, the way he teased her.

"Uncle, Viji says you are a terrific shot. Is it true that you have shot a wild boar?"

"A long time ago, when we didn't know much about wild-life protection," said Capt. Dev. "Now I wouldn't raise a rifle except in defence."

Soorie had been silent all along. He craned his neck out of the window every few minutes and it annoyed Capt. Dev. What was wrong with the boy? He was so restless.

"Soorie, you will sit back if you know what is good for you," he warned.

"Yes, Uncle."

Another kilometre or so and they were well out of town. Soorie thrust his head out again.

"Young man, you do that once more and I will chuck you out of the window!" bellowed Capt. Dev.

Suddenly Soorie seemed to go wild. He bounced about the seat and waved his arms in frenzy, "Wait! Wait! He has come! He is here!"

"Who? What?" yelled Capt. Dev. "Stop that wild dance. I say STOP IT!"

Soorie wasn't listening. "It's Chow. He has been following us. Wait for him, Uncle. Please wait!"

"What the dickens," muttered Capt. Dev, steering the vehicle to the left. Soorie struggled with the handle and opened the door. Chow sprang into his lap, panting in triumph.

Capt. Dev glowered at Soorie. "You knew all along, didn't you that the dog was following us?"

"I...I did see a dog running behind us," admitted Soorie.

"You, young schemer. I have a good mind to leave you and your dog right here."

"Please don't do that, Uncle," said tender-hearted Laila, her chubby face full of concern. "Chow is a good dog. Let us take him along."

Capt. Dev drummed his fingers on the steering wheel and looked at Soorie, with the dog on his lap—a picture of innocence. "All right," he sighed. "But I am warning you. Any nonsense..."

"Thank you, Uncle!"

* * *

After the initial chatter, the four children at the back had fallen silent. Viji wondered if she should offer to make the *puris* at the Camp. She had brought the rolling pin and everything. Only Viji wasn't sure if her *puris* would turn out all puffed up and golden like her mother's. She hoped they would.

Vinay watched Smita in the front seat, chatting happily with Uncle and felt very angry. He had wanted to sit in front and learn driving but there she was instead, showering smiles on poor Uncle. She could charm anyone with her pretty-pretty ways. Vinay would

never admit it to any one but he was really sore that Smita had beaten him by two marks for the 'Best All Round Student' award. Two miserable marks. Oh, heck!

Dilip fingered the rifle and wondered if Capt. Dev would let him shoot some partridges with it. Oh, imagine that! Half a dozen plump, juicy partridges. 'What is that in the bag, son?' his mother would ask. 'Just a few partridges I shot, Mum. They will be nice, roasted.' His mother's eyes would bulge like saucers. 'You shot them, Dilip? You shot them yourself?'

Laila had worn herself out with her chatter. She sat hugging her knees and was silent for once. Laila had a little secret in a small round tin in her rucksack, that she felt both happy and guilty about. She had wanted to tell Dilip but then it wouldn't be a secret any more. So she kept it to herself.

The road became rough. The Land Rover bumped and boiled its way through the dusty road. It was not so bad until another vehicle passed by—a lorry carrying timber—then they were smothered in swirling dust which got inside the nose and the mouth and made them most uncomfortable.

By one o'clock they reached Murgaon. Murgaon was a small village with a few hundred people—a cluster of huts, a small school and a general store-cum-tea shop.

"We will stop here for lunch," said Capt. Dev, parking below a shady banyan. "Bring out the food basket, Vinay."

"I hope there are lots and lots of things to eat," squeaked Laila, "I am so hungry."

Mrs. Chandra had packed them a good lunch of lemon rice, *aloo-parantha* and fruit. They ate hungrily and then drank tea brought in mud cups from the tea

shop and felt refreshed. The last banana was in Soorie's hand when Capt. Dev said, "Make sure we have finished all the edible food. We will be cooking everything ourselves from now on. That is the real style of camping."

Vinay turned the basket upside down to show that there was nothing left. "Mother has given a can of milk for the night and the rest is all dry provisions."

Viji dusted the crumbs off her skirt and stood up. "It is past two already," she said, squinting at the sun to look at Capt. Dev. "How long will it take us from here?"

"You should know, you have been there before," grinned Capt. Dev. "The road is not too good. May be a couple of hours. He stood up and stretched lazily. "Vinay, get me another cup of tea, will you? I seem to need it today to stay awake. God knows when I will get my next cup."

If Capt. Dev had known the answer!

They climbed back into the vehicle and set off. Soorie had eaten well and within minutes he fell asleep, head lolling against Smita. Chow sat quiet on his lap, fighting the temptation to tug at Smita's yellow *dupatta*. He wanted to prove that he was a truly well-behaved dog.

As they neared the forest, the trees on either side of the road became tall and dense as if huddling together for comfort. Capt. Dev drove slowly, for the road was narrow and tortuous. Steep blue hills shrouded in mist rose in the distance. About an hour's drive and suddenly they came up against a sign post—PANALI GAME RESERVE. The road forked into three at this point, each plunging into the forest area.

It was not clear which road they should take. They all got down to stretch their legs. Dilip picked up a



fallen signpost. "Look, it says **CAMPING SITE THIS WAY**. But which way?"

"You both have been here before," said Capt. Dev, turning to the twins. "Do you remember?"

Viji shook her head. "I am afraid I don't."

"This way," said Vinay, pointing to the path on the left that seemed to wind its way towards the hills. "I remember clearly. That is the road to the camp site."

"Right," said Capt. Dev, sliding into his seat. "Everybody in, I have to drive real slow now. Wind up the window panes and keep your eyes peeled for wild animals."

"Oooh really?" cooed Laila. "What if they attack us?"

"We are armed, silly," said Dilip, tapping the gun, "and mind you keep your voice down or you will scare them away."

"Wild animals do not usually attack unless you annoy them," said Capt. Dev. "And the camp site will be well protected, you need not worry."

The Land Rover laboured its way through the mud track that seemed to twist and turn interminably. Trees canopied overhead, screening the sun. It grew strangely dark, almost unnatural because the sun was still up. The trees were like a massive curtain hiding the sun. Viji felt a shiver of excitement mingled with fear as she watched the branches brush the window panes like arms reaching out to greet them. She clutched the side of the seat and looked straight ahead.

They had driven for an hour or more when a wild, spotted deer bounded across the path followed by another.

"Please stop, Uncle, I want to take some photographs," said Smita, fumbling for her camera.

"Later," said Capt. Dev, not bothering to explain. Smita saw that his lips were pursed in a thin line and his hands were stretched tight over the steering wheel. She understood.

"Vinay, you are sure we are on the right road?" he asked.

"Of course I am sure." Vinay's voice was confident but deep inside he felt uneasy.

They went on and on, plunging deeper into the forest, but there was no sign of the camp site. The forest seemed to envelope them from all sides. Then suddenly, abruptly, the mud track ended, almost leaning on the craggy slope of the hill. Capt. Dev braked and the Land Rover shuddered to a halt.

Without a word, they climbed out one by one. The hill rose steep in front and all around the forest seemed to crowd upon them.

"We are lost," said Viji, turning deathly pale.

Vinay did not know where to look, so he stared at his feet.

Panali, here we come

Capt. Dev was more annoyed with himself than with Vinay. The boy had made a mistake and he had been fool enough to believe them. He should have had the sense to wait until some vehicle came along and asked someone. Instead he had done a thoughtless, stupid thing. Now, only now, his brother-in-law's words came back to him.

'The forest is thickest at the foot of the hills,' Dr. Chandra had said. 'And that is out of bounds for the public. The far side of the hill is full of dangerous

animals, so keep well away. Stick to the camp site Dev, and you are safe. But mind the six trouble-makers. Don't take your eyes off them even for a second.'

The kids had been all right. He himself had been the trouble-maker. He had brought them into the heart of the forest and into danger. Getting back on that mud track was not going to be easy, if not impossible. Daylight was but an orange glimmer through the leaves. In about an hour the sun would set, plunging them in darkness. Capt. Dev knew he had to act quickly. Six children were dependent on him.

The children waited patiently for their Uncle to speak. Viji felt a fleeting moment of fear, like a sharp prick. She looked at Capt. Dev and felt brave again. There was something in the way he held his head and braced his shoulders. She *knew* they were safe with him.

"Not easy to reverse in this narrow space," said Capt. Dev. "Tell you what. I will take a look around and see where we are. There must be a path that leads to the camp site. If we can find it, then we are all right." He opened the door of the Land Rover and picked up his torch. "No one is to wander off, do you hear?"

"I will come with you, Uncle," said Vinay. He wanted desperately to do something. He couldn't bear the thought of sitting still with the others.

"No, you better stay here," said Capt. Dev. "Get inside, everyone. Ease up and be calm. I will be back in a few minutes." He held the torch but did not light it as there was still some light. The kids watched as he walked carefully along a narrow space that skirted round the slope. His tall figure plunged into the thick undergrowth and he was lost from view.

They climbed one by one into the Land Rover and

fell strangely silent. Chow scuffled and whined, perhaps weary of the new environment. Everything was so quiet and yet not quiet at all. A thousand sounds dinned into their ears. Insects screeched; birds chirped and warbled; leaves rustled; and somewhere, far away, wolves howled. Sounds of the forest that set one's teeth on edge. Laila moved close to Dilip and put her arm through his.

Vinay clenched and unclenched his fists. He was so angry. Angry with himself because he had been the world's greatest oaf and had goofed up everything. Why were the others so quiet when he felt ready to explode? This silent resentment of theirs was far worse than angry words. It was all very well for them to blame him. They wouldn't understand that he had really been so sure about the road. So cocksure that he had not made a mistake. That was the trouble.

Worse than anything, there was Smita. He couldn't bear to look Smita in the face. She would never let him forget it.

Smita was, in fact, feeling sorry for Vinay. For all her sophisticated exterior, Smita was a warm-hearted girl. She knew that anyone could have made a mistake with the roads. It wasn't fair the way they had all shut up instead of saying something to ease Vinay's wretchedness. But she too couldn't think of anything to say. Instead she said to Soorie, "Tell that dog of yours to sit still."

"He's hungry," grumbled Soorie, "and so am I."

"Oh, shut up," said Viji crossly "Here we are, lost in a great big forest and all you can think of is food. You had a great big lunch not so long ago."

Soorie groaned. Fine camping trip this was going to be if he couldn't even talk about food, let alone have it!

It was ages since they had eaten lunch and he was famished. Soorie wasn't really aware of the danger they were in. He was sure Uncle Dev would find the camp site soon and they would be pitching their tents and cooking a nice, warm meal. What he didn't like was the way Viji sat there at the back and glared at him like a school ma'm. Poor Vinay. It must be awful to have a twin sister.

Dilip looked at his watch and felt uneasy. Capt. Dev had been gone for over twenty minutes. What was taking him so long? He looked across at Viji.

"Should we sound the horn?" she asked.

Dilip shook his head. "Let us wait a little longer. He is sure to be back."

It grew darker every second. Dilip forced himself not to look at his watch but the wretched thing ticked away loud as a battledrum. When he looked again, it was six o'clock.

Dilip knew he had to do something. He was the eldest, so they would expect him to be their leader. How was he to decide what to do? He had a queasy feeling in the stomach, the same as when he was faced with a difficult question in the exam.

"Dilip, he is not back yet," said Viji, her voice full of alarm.

"I will go and see," he said, opening the back door of the vehicle. "Soorie, take a torch and come along with me."

"Me?" Soorie wasn't keen to go wandering off in the dark. "Uncle told us to stay here, didn't he? He said he will find his way back."

"Shut up and do as I tell you," said Dilip sharply. "No, the dog is not coming."

Dilip moved cautiously through the undergrowth

with Soorie following him. The torch threw an eerie yellow ribbon of light which did not make it any easier to see ahead. They walked in the direction that Uncle had gone and found a narrow mud track less than a foot wide. In many parts it was covered by scrub. They kept to the path although their progress was slow and tedious.

It was not really cold but Soorie shivered; he had to clench his fists to stop his teeth from chattering. It was pitch dark and one did not know what dangers lurked a foot away.

They had walked for about fifteen minutes but it seemed much, much longer. The narrow path twisted abruptly to the right and disappeared under some bushes. Dilip kept the beam of the torch to the ground and stepped forward. Suddenly, he jerked to a halt.

"Look!"

He grabbed Soorie's arm and pulled him down. They found themselves kneeling beside a wide, dark pit, at the bottom of which they could barely discern the figure of Capt. Dev lying absolutely still.

"G... Golly!" whispered Soorie, "Is he d...ead?"

"Don't be an idiot," said Dilip, swallowing hard. "Uncle..." he called. "Uncle Dev!"

No answer.

They called again and again, their voices sounding more and more desperate and almost unreal in the depths of the forest. The two boys knelt beside the gaping, cavernous pit and called to their Uncle, not sure if he was dead or alive.

Then they saw a slight, very slight movement in the pit. And they heard him groan.

"He is alive, thank goodness," gasped Dilip with a



flood of relief. "Uncle, it is us, Dilip and Soorie. Can you hear? You fell into a pit, Uncle?"

They could not see his face but they saw the blue sleeve of his shirt and his hand clutching a leg which looked horribly twisted. He groaned again.

Dilip could feel the heavy weight of fear in his chest and he struggled to fight it. "We will get you out, Uncle. We will get you out." He said it over and over again, as if to convince himself.

However, Dilip did not know how to get him out. The pit was too deep and had steep sides. It was filled with bramble. It was madness to get inside in the dark. Even if he did, what was he to do with Uncle? He would never be able to lift him up not even with Soorie's help. He looked at Soorie who knelt by the pit like some weird statue—mouth open, eyes bulging with fear.

"Come on, Soorie, there is no time to lose," cried Dilip rising to his feet. "We must get the others. Quick!"

They made their way back the way they had come. It was pitch dark now and the torch light was pathetic, to say the least. It glowed so feebly as if ashamed of itself. From far away came the sound of wolves howling. Dilip shuddered and hoped Soorie would not hear. Soorie had heard and was doing everything in his power to prevent himself from collapsing with fright. As they approached the Land Rover, Vinay hurried towards them, followed by the others.

"Where is Uncle? Where is Uncle. *What's happened?*"

Dilip tried to keep the alarm out of his voice, but it showed. "He...he has fallen into a pit," he said hoarsely. "Hurt his leg bad. We have got to get there quick and help."

Slowly the words sank home. They were six children on their own in the forest. It was night. And they had to save their Uncle who was badly hurt.

How?

In distress

The danger was so acute, so real that even the chatterbox Laila had become quiet. The children knew they had to act quick; there was no time to worry about the fearful obstacles that loomed before them. Thus they were spared the misery of fear—at least for the moment and that was the greatest blessing.

"We have got a good strong rope that comes with the tent," said Vinay. "I will get it. Hold the door open, Soorie, and shine the torch." He dragged the rolled up tent from the back of the vehicle, untied it and pulled out the thick coil of rope.

"Yes, we can haul him up with that," said Dilip. "Come, let us go. We better walk single file. Mind your dog, Soorie."

"The first-aid box," reminded Viji, pulling it out from beneath the rear seat. "I have got it."

They wound their way cautiously through the dark. The moonlight was so fully screened off by leaves that it might as well have not been there. Dilip walked in front, followed by Viji, Soorie, Smita, Laila and Vinay in the rear. Chow ran beside Soorie and was quietly alert, well aware that it was some sort of an emergency. No one spoke and their footsteps made a soft, crunching sound as they walked.

"There is the pit," said Dilip halting. "Careful now."

The children knelt down and followed the narrow beam of torchlight that Dilip shone into the pit.

"Uncle... Uncle Dev..." sobbed Laila, unable to control her tears. The shock of seeing poor uncle lying twisted and helpless was too much for her. Dilip shook her by the shoulders and said, "Stop it!"

Capt. Dev was more awake now. A sharp pain seared through his right leg and his head was very, very sore. To add to it, the bramble inside the pit was stinging him.

But more than all the pain outside was the pain inside. What a horrid, shocking thing had happened to them. Capt. Dev had been in tough situations before and knew what danger was. The present predicament was enough to unnerve the bravest of men. And they were merely children. What were they to do? Look after themselves or try to save him, lying utterly helpless in a pit?

"You have brought a rope, I see... good," he said with an effort to keep his voice steady. "See if you can lasso me out. The knot should be square, mind. I don't fancy falling back into the pit when I am half way up."

Only the previous day Capt. Dev had shown them how to tie a square knot. Thanks to that, now Vinay got it right the first time.

"Perfect," said Dilip, pulling on it to check. Capt. Dev grabbed the rope as Dilip flung it down and managed to loop it over himself.

"Okay," he said, squinting up at the glare from the torch. "Get behind Dilip one by one and pull slow and steady. Dig your feet in the ground. Pull from the shoulders, you will get all your strength in, that way."

They lined up behind Dilip, holding the thick rope in their palms. "Aw...", said Laila, as her hand closed over the rope.

"Here, use my hanky," said Smita. "It won't hurt so much now."

"Thanks, Smita."

"Soorie, keep Chow out of the way," called Dilip. "Ready, everyone?"

"Yes!"

"Okay, Uncle?"

"Uh... Yeah."

"Right, then... One... two... three... Pull!"

They angled their bodies against the ground and pulled until their palms were raw and calf muscles quivered with pain. But they could not budge their uncle.

"Heavier than a sack of potatoes, I am," Capt. Dev tried to joke. "This wretched leg won't let me do anything myself. One of you will have to get in here and push."

"I will come," said Vinay, rolling his trousers to his knees, before anyone could object. He crouched near the edge of the pit, poised for the jump. "Shine the torch in, someone."

"This pit is like a huge pincushion," cautioned Capt. Dev. "Lined with bramble and stuffed with it. Easy lad, easy."

Vinay spread his arms in front of him and jumped. His breath seemed to go out of him as he landed on the bramble.

"Okay, Vinay?"

"Yes..." he gasped "... Ouch!"

Thorns pricked his knees, elbows, hands and feet. Ignoring the pain, he scrambled to his feet. For a moment Vinay felt ill himself, looking at Capt. Dev. His big strong Uncle, suddenly so pale and helpless. It was dreadful.

"I will help you up, Uncle."

Capt. Dev clenched his teeth until his jaws ached. He was determined not to moan and groan, if he could help it. The boy was being so brave, he did not want to break down before him.

"Give me a good push," he said to Vinay. "Steady all the way, so I don't fall back."

Vinay soon found out how big and heavy Uncle was. But he pushed with a strength he never knew he had. The others pulled the rope till sweat poured down their faces, armpits and legs. Bit by bit, inch by inch, until they could feel their collective strength lifting Uncle's weight. When his head appeared above the pit, Dilip and Viji held him by the shoulders and heaved. Vinay supported his dangling legs. It was sheer hell all the way but they did it. They got their uncle out of the nasty pit!

"Hey, don't leave me down here," yelled Vinay. Pulling him out was not half as difficult. He was lighter and could use his feet against the wall of the pit.

"Good show, Vinay," said Dilip, as they helped him out. Vinay was bramble-scratched and sore but felt a warm glow of achievement.

Capt. Dev tried to sit but felt so dizzy that he had to lie down. "Have a look at the leg, Viji," he muttered. "You have got your first-aid badge in the Girl Guides, haven't you? See how bad it is."

Viji knelt down and looked. It was worse than she had imagined. Really bad. The right trouser leg was torn and a deep, nasty gash ran half way down the shin to the ankle. The leg was twisted, misshapen.

"The bone is broken, for sure," she said. "We have got to splint it or there will be more damage."

"Good girl," said Capt. Dev with a weak smile. "Get on with it then."

Viji looked at her friend. "Smita, will you help..." She broke off, reading the panic in Smita's eyes. Smita couldn't stand the sight of blood. Her face turned deathly pale and her eyes seemed to plead, "Please, Viji, leave me out of it."

"I will give you a hand," said Dilip. "What is to be done?"

"A splint. We need a flat, strong piece of wood, at least six inches longer than his leg."

They looked around with the help of the torch. "Will this do?" asked Dilip.

"I guess it will have to for now," said Viji. She carefully cleaned the wound, covered it with lint and bandage. "Uncle, we have got to straighten the leg and splint it," she said, bending anxiously over him. "It will hurt."

"Okay, doc, get it over with," he said. Weariness was creeping on him and his head felt as if it would split. Even so, in the midst of all the pain and misery, Capt. Dev was proud of the children. They were holding up better than he had imagined. It was good to see Viji in control. Thank God, she hadn't panicked. She wasn't the daughter of a surgeon for nothing.

Viji, in fact, was praying fervently. Praying that she should do the right thing. If anything happened to Uncle's leg, it would be the absolute end. Her Uncle Dev, the dapper young Captain in the army. He had to be as fit as before or she would never forgive herself.

Smita watched Viji and wished she had her courage. She knew she was being a coward but could not bring herself to look at the injured, twisted leg. She would faint with fright, she was sure of it.

"Dilip, you take the foot and sit facing Uncle," said Viji, trying hard to remember clearly what the

first-aid instructor had taught her. "Hold the foot up gently and in line with the body, that is it. Vinay, you face Dilip and steady the knee. Y...Yes...Now both of you—pull!"

An agonised groan from Capt. Dev, sharp and short. Then silence. His hands clawed into the earth but he did not flinch, while Viji, trembling inside, placed the wooden splint beneath his leg and tied it with Smita's *dupatta*.

Capt. Dev's face glistened with sweat; his breathing was rapid, as if he had just run up a hill. "Thanks..." he said in a hoarse whisper, closed his eyes and fell asleep almost immediately.

"He is exhausted," said Smita, wiping his brow. "How can we carry him to the vehicle? He can't get up."

One problem was over, and another had cropped up.

"Tell you what," said Dilip. "Two of us can spend the night here with Uncle. The rest sleep in the vehicle. How about that?"

"Blimey! It is dangerous out here."

"And cold. And horrible!"

"Uncle has to be warm."

"Then someone think of a better idea," snapped Dilip. He was beginning to feel the strain.

"He is right," said Smita. "It is late and we are all bone-tired. Best to do as he says. We can get some blankets and things to make it comfy here."

While the others argued, Dilip took Vinay aside. "We have got three girls on our hands, Vinay," he said, worried. "It will be quite a job to look after them as well."

"I guess so," said Vinay, glancing over his shoulder at the girls. "They will be frightened out of their wits

and won't be much help. What a soup we are in!" He thought for a moment and said, "I can stay here with Viji and look after Uncle. You take the others to the vehicle."

"How about food?" asked Soorie. "I am *staarv*..."

"So is everyone else," cut in Vinay. "There is plenty of milk and that will have to do for now. Viji and I can sleep here with Uncle. Can you get us some blankets, Dilip?"

The others went back to the vehicle. Dilip and Soorie returned with blankets and milk, with Chow following close upon their heels.

"Uncle is fast asleep, best not to disturb him," said Viji. She covered him with a blanket and rolled another into a pillow.

"Thanks for the milk—the best I have tasted," said Vinay. Dilip, Soorie and Chow made their way back to the vehicle. Soorie's eyes were so full of sleep that he forgot, for the moment, his fears of the forest. Dilip wished he wasn't the eldest. It wasn't fair. He was only fourteen.

Night in the forest

Dilip and Soorie returned to the vehicle to find Smita and Laila unrolling blankets on to the seats. Only Smita had a sleeping bag. It was an expensive, inflatable one with a pillow and a quilt.

Smita spread it out on the floor at the back of the vehicle. "You sleep here Laila," she said. "Soorie and I can use the rear seat on either side. I have put two blankets and a pillow for you in front, Dilip."

"Thanks, but I won't be sleeping," said Dilip. "I would like to keep watch."

"You think we will be attacked?" asked Soorie, alarmed.

"Calm down, Soorie, and go to sleep," said Smita. "Dilip, wake me up when you feel tired and I will keep watch."

Soorie tied Chow to a nearby tree and gave him a generous share of milk. "That is all for dinner tonight, Chow," he said, "We will make up for it tomorrow."

Laila curled herself into a ball inside the sleeping bag and was asleep in seconds. For Soorie and Smita, the seats were narrow and uncomfortable. It was impossible to turn from one side to the other without falling off. But they too slept—the sleep of weariness and exhaustion.

At the wheel sat Dilip, gun in hand. He was very, very tired but wide awake, wondering how he would spend the long hours by himself. The dreadful events of the day tossed in his mind. The future seemed a dark void. In just one day they had been jerked out of civilisation and flung into the heart of the forest. Dilip heard once more the wolves howling in the distance and shuddered as he tightened his hold on the gun.

"Should I have given the gun to Vinay?" he thought. "The twins and Uncle Dev were out in the open where the risks were greater. But Vinay was brave. He might shoot his mouth off at times but he had real pluck. Fancy jumping into the pit like that! And Viji, she was a tough girl, that one. A seriously wounded man to handle and she had been as cool as a cucumber!"

Dilip began to think of the biggest problem they would have to face in the morning. To find the camp site and get medical help for Uncle. But he could not

pin down his thoughts. They criss-crossed and somersaulted in his weary mind until his eyes drooped and he slowly sagged into the seat and fell asleep.

* * *

"Uncle...how do you feel?" Viji knelt beside Capt. Dev and peered anxiously into his pale, haggard face. "Do you want some milk?"

Capt. Dev opened his eyes and smiled at her. "No thanks," he said in a tired voice. "My head feels sore but the leg is better... You, kids, get some sleep." His brow furrowed in pain and he closed his eyes again.

Viji looked carefully for any wound on the head but there was none except a slight bruise over the right temple.

"We will take turns to keep watch," said Vinay. "You get some sleep, Viji, I will wake you when I am really tired."

Viji brushed away the stones from a patch of ground, lay down and covered herself with a blanket. "Uh... I am sure I will get no sleep lying on this rough ground," she grumbled. In five minutes she had drifted into deep slumber.

Vinay looked about and found himself a weapon—a stout rough piece of wood about three feet long. It was going to be a long vigil, he might as well stretch out beneath his blanket. There was nothing to do but stare into the darkness and while away the time.

Vinay had a vivid imagination which did not remain inactive for long. As he stared into the dark he wondered what nocturnal creatures lurked around. Snakes? Hyenas? Bears? Lions? No, he was getting carried away as usual. It looked pretty safe. The only thing to do was

to be alert. Then if anything happened—Vinay was staring into darkness, suddenly, he froze.

Lumbering in front of him, only about ten feet away was a massive, frightening, black creature, standing still, watching him.

Vinay did not move. He stared back, muscles tense, ready for action. If the beast moved forward, he would attack. One hefty swing of the wood like a club. Heck, if only he had the rifle, it would have been an easy, sure shot.

Vinay was nervous. He licked his dry lips and swallowed. The sound was so loud he felt he had gulped a stone. He tried to think clearly as his Uncle would have done. He had to be sensible. Vinay knew the odds were against him. The creature (whatever it was) was twice his size. He would put up a brave fight but in the end be mauled to death. At least he would go down in posterity as a brave boy who had grappled single-handed with a...

“Viji! wake up! A bear!!”

Viji shot out of her blanket and grabbed the torch.

“Where?”

“Th...there.”

She swung the torch round and the light fell on a big, dark tree stump, a few feet away. “You and your imagination, I should have known!” she grumbled. Now, don’t be surprised if we are attacked. Go to sleep, Vinay, for heaven’s sake. We *all* need rest. Wild animals, just leave them alone.”

That was Viji all over. She could be cool even in a crisis. Vinay could see some logic in what she said. In any case he too was tired. His vivid imagination soon folded up and he fell asleep. He slept fitfully and dreamt that he had grappled with three bears single-handed.

Smita woke up in the morning feeling awful. Her tongue felt swollen and throat dry as dust. Her body ached and the left arm was numb as she had slept on it. She got up, poured some water from the can and climbed out to wash her face.

Soorie was up and about, but the lazy fellow had not rolled up his blanket. Dilip still slept, straggled over the steering wheel, with one lanky leg dangling out from the side of the vehicle. Laila was curled up like a kitten inside her sleeping bag.

Smita washed her face and brushed her teeth. Then she drank the deliciously cool water, enjoying every sip as she had never done before. Her stomach craved for food, she was so hungry. But she had to push the thought away from her mind.

It was still very early in the morning. The forest looked more friendly now with the cheerful sound of twittering birds. Smita wished the others were up. There was so much to be done. Somehow they had to help Uncle, cook some breakfast. Suddenly, she realised that there was no sign of Soorie. Surely, he could not have gone wandering off by himself. His dog Chow was still tied to the tree. Chow lolled his tongue and made noisy overtures to Smita, pleading to be untied. She felt a growing sense of fear as she looked around for Soorie.

She went to the front and shook Dilip. “Soorie,” she said, her voice full of alarm. “Soorie is missing!”

“Uh...whazzup,” growled Dilip, struggling from the depth of slumber, “Whalla malla?”

At the very moment, Vinay sat hunched beside Capt. Dev, feeling his pulse. With the other hand he shook his sister almost fiercely.

“Viji...Viji...wake up. Viji! It is Uncle...”

Gen. Soorie Sampath !

Soorie was glad to be up after lying all night twisted and cramped on the seat. He hated confined spaces like a bird hates a cage. It was bad enough at home on Sunday afternoon, when his mother sent him into his room for a 'quiet nap'. But being cooped up inside a Land Rover for one whole day and then having spent the night in it was the absolute limit.

Soorie climbed out of the vehicle and shook his arms and legs about. That felt better. He reached cautiously for the can of water beneath the seat, splashed his face with it and then drank. Not as much as he would have liked to but as much as he dared. It was the only water they had and he would surely get scalped if he drank more than his share. He tried to take a peek at Dilip's watch to see the time, but withdrew laughing at the comic sight of lanky Dilip strung over the steering wheel like a scarecrow. So much for his having been on guard!

Everyone was asleep including Chow and it would be ages before they got up. Soorie decided to go for a walk and do some bird-watching. Noiselessly, he opened his rucksack and pulled out his Observation Book and the precious binoculars which he strung over his neck. Then with a smart salute at his sleepy friends, he walked away into the forest.

Even at home, Soorie liked to be up before the others. He could potter around in peace without anyone breathing down his neck. Now it was very early in the morning and dawn was just a feather of light on the horizon. The joyful medley of birds' songs—soft and muted, drew him well out of sleep.

The forest did not seem half as fearful or hostile as it

had been at night. The sun began to peep here and there through the trees, the air was crisp and cool. The forest was a lovely, friendly place. Soorie, who loved little animals, birds and insects, found the forest full of them. Wild fowls scuttled in front of him; a brown hare bounded across the path; woodpeckers pecked away on the trees while cuckoos filled his ears with music. He saw a variety of birds and flowers which he never knew existed. He decided to check these in the encyclopaedia at the school library when he got back.

Soorie was walking along happily. Then he saw the most beautiful tree. A tall, graceful, wild mango tree with boughs reaching over hundred metres. Around it was a wide open space dotted with recently cut tree stumps. Of the trees, there was no sign.

Soorie was delighted with the tree. "My, you are the Queen of the Forest, you are," he said with a gracious bow.

Soorie sat on a tree stump and surveyed the area with his nine-year old wisdom. It was a good place for camping. Where was the need to go looking for the camp site? It was probably full of unfriendly grown-ups anyway. They could pitch their tents and stay here until their uncle recovered. They would have a whale of a time climbing trees, looking for birds' nests, insects, worms—Woweee! Almost as good as being marooned on an island. It would be a new camp site with a board! 'Soorie's Camping Site. Parents not allowed.'

It was nice to be on his own for a while. Soorie was tired of the way people picked on him all the time. Like that 'school ma'm', Viji. Or his mother! *She* should get the Gold Medal for nagging.

'Soorie, did you wash behind the ears?'

'Soorie, brush your teeth the proper way.'



'Soorie, why does your hair look so wild?'

'Don't make a noise when you eat, Soorie.'

Don't do this, don't do that. He was quite resigned to the way his mother nagged him. Just before he left for the camp, she had said, 'Don't go wandering off on your own, Soorie. It's dangerous.' He had nodded, without listening.

Now, even Viji was not there to pick on him. The freedom was exhilarating and he was going to enjoy it. He became Soorie, the General, leading his troops to battle. Hundreds of soldiers, thousands, were gathered around his feet, eager to hear his inspiring words. General Soorie Sampath shoved the pipe in his mouth, placed one jaunty foot over the other knee and spoke in his rich, booming voice:

'Courage, dear soldiers, and above all love for thy country! Even when the last breath is left in thee, fight on! If thou diest in battle, it will be a hero's death!' A bit too flowery, perhaps, he would have to revise the speech. Should he say *thee* and *thy* and *thou*. He reckoned that was the way Generals spoke.

Then, victorious after battle, General Soorie Sampath, with a row of medals gleaming on his chest rose to take the salute of honour as a hundred thousand soldiers marched past him...

Soorie heard no noise. Just felt the presence of someone behind him. He took a deep breath and turned slowly round. The blood seemed to drain to the soles of his feet at the sight before him.

A few yards from Soorie stood an enormous, wild buffalo. A massive creature much taller than him, with horns that spanned two metres. Head down, it clawed the earth with its hoof and glowered menacingly at the frightened boy.

The danger was real. For a brief spell, Soorie froze with fear. The next moment he was running, running.

He fled in wild panic, he did not know where. Through shrub and scrub, through bush and bramble he ran, looking back just once. The buffalo was after him, so he kept running. Soorie was young and nimble, the beast was huge and heavy. Soorie weaved his way in and out of the undergrowth, falling twice. His knees were skinned and his elbows grazed, but he ran on till each breath was a pain in his chest and his calf muscles cried for rest. When he looked back again, he could not see the buffalo.

Panting, Soorie looked about him. He had to rest. He began to climb the nearest tree—an old teak with a massive, tall, lofty trunk and thick, leafy branches. Soorie loved climbing trees and was quite an expert. But this was no fun. The bark was rough and sharp. He shinned his way up, grazing his hands, chin, and legs until he was ready to cry aloud. Sweat trickled down his face into his eyes and mouth. He clawed and struggled up, afraid to look down. He must not fall. He could not afford to fall. He would either break his neck or the nasty buffalo would gore him with its deadly horns. Somehow, Soorie crabbed his way up until he reached a branch that was about five metres above the ground. Straddling his legs over it, he moved inch by inch until he was hidden behind the thick foliage.

Soorie peered through the leaves and held his breath. The buffalo came crashing through the undergrowth, hissing and fuming with rage. It sped past beneath the tree and was lost from view.

Soorie heaved his tired body over the bough, buried his face in the shiny green leaves and wept. He was miserable, lonely and terribly afraid. He had the choice

of starving to death on the tree or going down to be killed by the buffalo. Either way he was finished. He could imagine it in the papers—a small news item. At school, perhaps a prayer meeting, and the kids saying, 'Not a bad sort, Soorie. He didn't deserve such a ghastly end.' His parents would certainly die of broken hearts, for, in spite of all their nagging, they loved him just as he loved them. And Chow—who would look after his wonderful dog, Chow?

It wasn't fair. He was only nine. There were lots and lots of things he wanted to do yet. Finish his scrap book, tour the country on a bicycle, climb the Himalayas and sail round the world. And when he was grown up and very rich, he had planned to buy himself an island and be the ruler. With an army, fortress and all.

Soorie longed for his mother. She would clean his wounds, give him a warm meal and fuss over him. He longed to hear her voice even if she was going to scold him. He knew he deserved it. Thus Soorie sat on top of the tree feeling lonely, afraid and very, very hungry.

* * *

Dilip opened his drowsy eyes and looked at Smita. "Whazzup?" he slurred.

"Soorie," said Smita, her voice full of anxiety. "He's missing. Gone off somewhere by himself."

"I will flatten the young devil when he comes back," scowled Dilip, climbing out of the seat. He stretched himself and looked sheepishly at Smita. "I must have dozed off."

"Never mind that now," snapped Smita in an urgent voice. "We have to find Soorie, he is sure to get into

trouble by himself. Look. He couldn't have gone much before I got up. I will go and look for him."

"No, I will go," said Dilip squaring his shoulders. "It is no job for a girl to go wandering into the forest to be at the mercy of wild beasts."

"What is the difference ?" asked Smita, bristling. "I am fast on my feet and I can take Chow along to track him down. It is better that you stay with Laila. She will raise hell when she wakes up and finds you are missing."

"I guess that is true," said Dilip. "If you are sure you want to go..." He walked over to the tree and untied Chow, who looked tense and anxious as if aware that Soorie was in trouble.

"My mother was right," said Smita, as she changed into her brown canvas shoes. "These high heels are most uncomfortable for camping. Come on, Chow, let us find Soorie." She ran along to keep up with Chow who was already bounding through the shrubs.

Dilip watched her with admiration. Dainty Miss Smita, always pretty and poised, now with her clothes in a mess and hair in a tumble, but not a moment's hesitation about going into the forest on her own. Vinay was wrong about her. She was a terrific girl, she really was.

Smita hurried along behind Chow, nervous but sure that they would find Soorie. They reached the wild mango tree where 'General Soorie Sampath' had made his stirring speech a short while before. Chow jerked to a halt, and went around in circles sniffing the ground. He picked up the notebook that had fallen beside the tree stump and ran to Smita.

"It is Soorie's Observation Book !" gasped Smita. "Where is Soorie ? Good God, what has happened

to him !" Chow sniffed here and there, then began to run again. "Chow ! Chow ! Not so fast, please !" cried Smita. But Chow just flashed through the undergrowth and did not stop until he came to the teak tree. Smita caught up with him and found him barking excitedly. Smita looked up at the tree and saw Soorie's grubby face peering down at them.

"Oh, Soorie, thank goodness, you are all right," said Smita, breathlessly. "What on earth are you doing up there ? Come down at once !"

"I...I can't."

"Why not ? If you can climb up, you can jolly well climb down."

"My foot is caught here, I can't get it out," moaned Soorie. "Can you come up and help ! It is hurting."

"All right, I am coming. What got into you to climb this monstrous tree ?" she muttered as she struggled her way up. You could have chosen something easier than a tree with a gnarled scaly trunk." It was like climbing a spiked wall. Smita gritted her teeth and kept on until she could see Soorie, with his foot jammed between two branches. Smita steadied herself by leaning on the trunk and carefully freed his foot. Soorie stretched out his hand and pulled her up. She was bruised, breathless and angry.

"What have you got to say for yourself ?" she began.

"I was chased by a wild buffalo," said Soorie. "I ran and ran, he kept on after me. I climbed this tree and managed to give him the slip. When I tried to get down, my foot got jammed." He blinked back the tears and looked at her. "It was awful, Smita. Thanks for saving me."

Smita looked at his smudged, tear-stained face and did not have the heart to be angry. He had been

through a lot already. "Let us get down and go back to the others," she said. "They will be getting worried. Do you think you can manage with that foot?"

"The foot is all right. How about the buffalo?"

"Let us hope he won't come back this way," said Smita. "We will have to take a chance. Let us hurry."

When they came down, Chow was there to give Soorie a warm greeting with licks and barks and happy yelps. And it was Chow who led them back to the Land Rover where Dilip, Laila and Viji waited for them.

On their own

Smita and Soorie broke into an excited run when they neared the vehicle. "Soorie was chased by a wild buffalo," said Smita breathlessly. "He climbed a tree and when I found him..."

Her voice trailed off as she looked at the others. Something was wrong, she was certain of it. Viji looked pale and drawn; Dilip was glum; Laila had red, swollen eyes as if she had been crying.

"What is the matter?" asked Smita.

"It is Uncle," said Viji, her voice almost inaudible. "He...he is worse."

"Worse?"

"Unconscious. We cannot rouse him at all." Viji's voice quivered with emotion. "He seems to have had a serious head injury."

"It wasn't so bad yesterday," said Smita. "No big cuts or anything. And he was talking."

"He seems to have gone off since last night," said Viji. "That happens sometimes. I have read it in one

of my father's medical books. An injury can cause blood to collect inside the skull. It presses on the brain and the person becomes drowsy or unconscious. That is really dangerous if not treated soon."

The kids looked at each other in grim silence. Problems were crowding upon them thick and fast. This really was the worst.

"Is Uncle going to die?" asked Laila sniffing.

"Easy Lol, it is not so bad," said Dilip, squeezing her hand. He turned to the others. "We must hurry, Vinay will be waiting for us. Once we bring Uncle here, we can find our way and get help".

"How do we carry Uncle without some sort of a stretcher?" asked Smita.

They were silent for a moment, thinking.

"We can use the rear seats of the vehicle," said Viji. "They are quite long and sturdy. If we tie the two together..."

"Brilliant!" cried Dilip. "Just what we need." He opened the rear door of the Land Rover and pulled out the seats. "Soorie, get me the rope."

They put the two seats side by side and strapped them carefully together with rope. "Now we have got to find two long, sturdy poles. Come on, Laila and Soorie, help me find them."

Half an hour later, the stretcher was ready, about three feet wide and perhaps a few inches shorter than Capt. Dev.

"This will do all right," said Dilip, satisfied. "Smita, can we use your sleeping bag?"

"Sure." Smita rolled it out over the stretcher and covered it with a sheet and blanket. "Let us hurry, Vinay will be worried," she said.

They shouldered the stretcher and hurried along

the path that led to the pit. They found Vinay sitting beside Capt. Dev, his face strained with worry. The children knelt down and looked at the still form on the ground.

"How is he ?"

"No change at all. We have got to get him out of here as soon as possible."

"We made the stretcher with the seats," said Dilip, proudly. "Let us get him on to it."

Capt. Dev was heavy but they managed to lift him on to the stretcher. Carrying him was grim business they soon found out. Dilip and Smita lifted the head end while Viji and Vinay took the foot end, supporting the legs that dangled a few inches. Soorie and Laila tried to help but they got in the way more often than not.

It was struggle all the way and it took them a long time to reach the vehicle. When at last, they lowered the stretcher by the side of the Land Rover, they were all done in, breathless. All except Vinay. He got himself some water from the can, drank thirstily and came back wiping his mouth.

"A few minutes' rest, then we pack our things and get going," he said.

"You must be crazy," said Dilip, flopping down on the ground. "It is no use trudging now, with no food inside us. We should cook and eat before we go."

"And let Uncle die in the meantime ?" asked Vinay angrily. "No way. We are moving right now."

"Don't be dumb, Vinay," reasoned Dilip. "It is just not on. We don't have the strength to carry him. We will be collapsing with hunger all over the place."

"You care more for your stomach than for Uncle's life," fumed Vinay.

Dilip flared up. He cared as much for Capt. Dev as the rest of them. He was only trying to decide what was best. He stood up. "If it wasn't for your stupid mistake about the roads Uncle would have been hale and hearty."

That hurt. Vinay bit his lip and turned away. He was tense and worried, he could not think clearly. Deep down he felt angry, miserable and most of all afraid about Uncle's life.

"Anyone could have made that mistake about the roads," said Smita. "Let us forget it now. But I too think we should eat first and then move on."

The others nodded. Viji went up to her twin brother and put her hand on his shoulder. "Vinay, be reasonable. You are tired and so is everyone else. Come, give us a hand with the cooking."

Vinay shrugged and turned round. "If that is the way everyone feels."

Viji brought out the stove and began to fill it with kerosene. "We can whip up a quick omelette and cook some porridge," she said. "Then, some tea. Smita, help me with the eggs, will you ? Use twelve. Here is the bowl for whipping. Add the salt and pepper. I will get the boys to start the fire."

Smita gaped. She knew next to nothing about boiling water let alone making an omelette. She never stepped into the kitchen at home except to say that she was hungry. She took the eggs and looked uncertainly at them. She wasn't sure how to break them but felt embarrassed to ask. She broke them against the side of the pan. The first one dribbled partly over the side of the pan and had to be mopped up. The next one sort of crumbled and bits of egg shell got mixed up with the egg.

"These beastly eggs," she muttered, hoping no one would see. Least of all...

"Nothing wrong with the eggs, Miss Butter-fingers," Vinay grinned at her. "Here, let me help." With irrepressible jauntiness, he showed a red-faced Smita how to break the eggs and whip them for an omelette.

"Wish we had brought some matches," wailed Smita. "Now we will have to waste time with the fire-drill."

"The rules of real camping, Uncle says, is to build your own fire," said Soorie. "Using matches would have spoilt all the fun."

"We have done it in the Scout Camp, hope it works now," said Dilip. He whittled one end of a narrow stick into a sharp point. Then he took some strong string from his rucksack and wound it round the stick. He poised the stick, sharp end downwards on a block of wood on which Vinay had bored a small hole.

"Ready?"

Vinay nodded, steadying the block with both hands. Dilip began to turn the stick on the block, unwinding the string at the same time. The stick moved faster and faster until it was spinning like a top. When his fingers began to ache, Vinay took over. They tried again and again and were about to give up when the wood suddenly began to spark. Viji was ready with a stick dipped in kerosene. As soon as the flame appeared, she lit it. Soon the stove was crackling merrily with a fine blue flame.

"Hooray! At last we will have some food," grinned Soorie. "How long will it be, Viji?"

"Don't get in the way and waste my time," said Viji with a matronly look. "It is late as it is and we haven't even started."

Soorie sighed and walked away. Viji was ever bustling. Bustling as if it were her last hour on earth. Soorie found himself a rock and sat down. One would think they would at least have cheered him when he returned after his perilous escapade from the buffalo. Forget the hero's welcome which he deserved. There was not even a thump on the back or a 'Brave lad, Soorie, real champ.' Nothing.

Laila joined him and sat cross-legged on the ground. She had just been shooed away by an irate Smita for dipping into the sugar tin.

"When I grow up I will marry a rich hotel-owner," she said thoughtfully. "I will have lots of good things to eat every day—*dosais*, *samosas*, cakes, ice-cream..."

"Aw... don't remind me of such mouth-watering stuff", groaned Soorie, gripping his stomach. "I will settle right now for the omelette and porridge."

"Soorie, tell me about the buffalo," said Laila. "Was it so...big?" She opened her arms wide.

"Ten times bigger than *that*," said Soorie. "Want to hear about it?"

Laila nodded and, cupping her chubby face in her hands, she listened.

As Soorie told her about the buffalo, the events got laced with his own heroism.

"I think you are very, very brave," said Laila when he finished.

"Aw... it was nothing," shrugged Soorie. "If I had the gun, I would have shown the beast a thing or two."

Viji soon had the oil heating in the pan. She poured the egg mixture, fishing out egg shells as best as she could. When the omelette was done, she made the porridge but, for some unknown reason it was lumpy.

Viji stirred it vigorously and tried her best to make the lumps go, but it didn't help.

When they sat down to eat, everyone was so ravenous that every bit of omelette and porridge was finished and the pan scraped clean. Chow too ate his share with relish. Tea was a weak concoction with milk-powder and Viji poured in extra sugar to liven it up.

It was a good feeling to have food inside. "If only Uncle would wake up and have something," said Viji. She went to where he lay on the stretcher and felt for his hand to check the pulse. He stirred and opened his eyes, moaning.

"Uncle, how do you feel?" asked Viji, hardly daring to hope.

"T...terrible," he said, "feel drowsy...very drowsy."

They all crowded around him, thrilled to see him awake.

"Would you like some food, Uncle?"

"Tea?"

"Water?"

"I will have some water," he said in a tired voice. Vinay held the water to his lips. He drank a few gulps and lay back. He looked at them—six, worried, tired, anxious young faces. Laila began to sniffle. Capt. Dev raised a hand and touched her cheek. "Brave kids," he said. "I am proud of you."

"We will carry you on the stretcher and try to find the camp site," said Dilip who was feeling relieved beyond words to see Capt. Dev awake. "We will get you to a doctor, soon enough. Shall we start now?"

Capt. Dev nodded and, closing his eyes, drifted into sleep.

Taking decisions

Viji tried to rouse Capt. Dev again but it was no use. The children looked uneasily at each other.

"It is one o'clock now," said Dilip. "Ten minutes to get your rucksacks ready. Then we are off. We will have to lock the vehicle and leave it here."

"Do we take the blankets?" asked Smita. "They are very heavy."

"I think we better," said Dilip. "Where will we spend the night, we just don't know."

They packed their essentials into the rucksacks as fast as they could. Cooking utensils, plates and the remaining rations were left behind in the Land Rover.

"We have got to hurry Laila," said Dilip, watching his sister struggle with her rucksack. "It is bulging like a sack of potatoes. Let me help."

"No, no, I can do it," squealed Laila. "See... I have done it! Just help me heave it on my back."

The children decided it was best to go along the path Soorie had taken earlier, with the hope that they would find a way to the camp site. Shouldering the stretcher, they set off. Soorie and Laila walked a little ahead and the others followed. The children had brightened up a little after seeing their Uncle wake up and talk. Only Viji was still worried.

The afternoon grew hot and soon they were mopping the sweat off their brows. They stopped often to rest and drink water, aware that the water in the can was fast dwindling.

Soorie and Laila were about fifty metres ahead and chattering like monkeys. Stopping here and there to pick wild flowers, poke at insects and look for birds' nests. All of a sudden, Laila gave a piercing shriek and

ran back towards the others. Rucksack and all she came dashing back through the path and fell upon Dilip, sobbing.

"Lol ! Lol ! what is the matter ?" cried Dilip in alarm. She pointed, trembling, to where Soorie was, but they could not see him. "Where is Soorie ?" he asked as they placed the stretcher on the ground. Dilip broke into a run, the others following. Only Smita stayed behind with Uncle.

They found Soorie squatting on the ground, looking anything but frightened. "Silly girl," he sneered at Laila. "Such a fabulous scorpion carrying the young ones on her back and you have gone and frightened her with your idiotic screaming. She is hiding behind that rock now. Look !"

Slowly he moved a rock lying by the side of the path. There it was, a huge scorpion at least six inches long, with several buff-coloured little ones on her back. She was still as a statue, her defences up, tail curved over the body and poised for a sting.

Soorie was really excited about his find. "Isn't she a beast ?" he beamed. "Smita, hurry up and get your camera, it will be a deadly shot."

"It will be a deadly sting if you don't watch out," growled Vinay, pulling Soorie up by the collar. "Leave that scorpion alone and get moving."

"He can't keep away from trouble," moaned Viji. "His mother did warn us."

Soorie quickened his pace and walked ahead. It set his teeth on edge to hear them go on and on. And to think that he showed them such a superfantabulous scorpion *with* her family. But not even a 'thank you' !

"S-Soorie," said Laila, catching up with him. She

liked Soorie a lot and couldn't bear to think he was angry with her. "Want a lemon drop ?"

Soorie swung round and grabbed the sweet. "Laila, that is cheating," he said popping it in his mouth. "Uncle said..."

"Ssh..." said Laila, rolling her black-button eyes. "Have another one."

Soorie could hardly resist, and between the two of them they finished the pack of lemon drops.

"There is my tree !" yelled Soorie, breaking into a run. "Come on, Laila, the tree !"

They ran ahead and flopped down panting beneath the wild mango tree. Few minutes later the others reached with the stretcher.

"Soorie is right, it is a beautiful tree," said Viji gazing up at the tall, graceful tree. "Someone has been here. So many trees have been cut and cleared away !"

"Strange. Father said this forest area is protected and cutting of trees is illegal," said Vinay.

"What does that mean—illegal ?" asked Laila.

"Against the law. If they are caught doing it, they will end up in prison." Vinay looked at the others. "In any case there is no one about now and it is a good enough place for a little rest. How is Uncle ?"

Capt. Dev was still drowsy. He moaned and moved his hands slightly but would not wake up. "I hope we find some help before it is dark," said Viji, her face clouded with worry.

"Do you think he is serious ?" asked Vinay.

Viji nodded. "Very serious. Both his leg and head need urgent treatment. Or he will get worse!" She broke off and sprang to her feet. "Soorie, what do you think you are doing," she screamed. "Look at him, the monkey !"

Soorie was climbing the mango tree. He heard Viji but pretended not to. A fellow couldn't even climb a tree without Miss 'prim and proper' nagging him. At this rate, she would beat his mother for that gold medal !

"If you fall and break your bones, I will whip you first," warned Dilip.

But Soorie was a good climber. And this was a prize tree for climbing. The trunk was not massive and just rough enough to grip with his hands and toes. Soorie heaved himself from branch to branch and in no time reached the top.

"Careful, Soorie !" called out Viji. They had enough to worry about without young Soorie falling off a tree.

Soorie wasn't listening. He could see the whole forest spread out before him. The vegetation was dense and dark near the hilly slope, gradually thinning away on either side. He could see a stream and beyond it, what looked like the camp site. Far away to the left he saw the main road like a grey ribbon skirting the fringe of the forest.

"I can see a stream," he yelled, "and I think the camp site. Yes, I am sure it is."

"Wait a minute, Soorie, I am coming," said Vinay. Swift and agile, he climbed the tree effortlessly. He was heavier than Soorie and as he went higher, he could feel the bough swaying under the strain.

"Vinay, be careful", said Viji, but her voice was just a whisper. They stood below the tree, tense and waiting.

Vinay reached the top. The branch on which he leaned swayed threateningly. There wasn't much time. Soorie pointed, "Look...can you see ?"

Vinay nodded. "Good show, Soorie," he grinned.

"I think you have saved us a lot of trouble. Now let us get down before this bough gets tired of us."

They came down slowly, first Vinay and then Soorie. There was a sigh of relief from the others when they reached the ground.

"It is the camp site all right," said Vinay excitedly. At least a couple of kilometres from here as the crow flies. The path winds all over the place. And there is a stream about half a kilometre away. I could see the fringe of the forest and some huts."

"Thanks to Soorie, we know where we are," said Viji, smiling. "What is the next step, Dilip ?"

Dilip glanced at his watch and was silent for a moment. "I think Vinay and Smita should go ahead while the rest of us stay back," he said.

"Why us ?" asked Smita.

"You both are the best sprinters among us," explained Dilip. "God knows we are really short of time. Will you do it ?"

They nodded.

"Lighten your rucksacks as much as possible," suggested Viji. "You will need some lint and anti-septic from the first-aid box. Torch, water..."

"An empty bottle will do, we will fill up at the stream," said Vinay. He tried to sound calm but was well aware of the dangers they'd be up against.

"Take your cardigans, it will get chilly in the evening."

"A knife and some string."

"I wish there was something to eat," said Vinay, "I guess we will have to do without it."

"Veenaay !"

It was Laila, struggling to open her rucksack. She withdrew a small round tin, opened it and offered it to Vinay.

"Milk toffee !" cried Vinay in glee.

"Two for each one," said Laila, passing it around. A few minutes of sheer, quiet bliss while the milk toffee disappeared. All but the two bits that Laila reserved for Capt. Dev.

"So Laila, you didn't pay any attention to the camping rules, did you ?" asked Dilip, wiping his mouth.

Laila looked at him guiltily. "There was nobody at home who could eat them, she said. "I was afraid they would get spoilt."

"I think you are a peach," laughed Vinay. "Three cheers to our fairy godmother; hip, hip, hooray !"

Towards the camp site

"You better take the gun," said Dilip, handing it to Vinay. "You never know when you will need it."

"Or, when *you will* need it," said Vinay, giving it back. "Look, we are just the two of us. We can run and climb a tree or something. You folks need it more, especially with Uncle being unwell."

Vinay would have liked more than anything to take the gun and show off in front of Smita. But he knew the priority.

"How long do you reckon it will take you both ?" asked Viji.

"It is four now. If all goes well, we should reach the camp site before dark. We will get back with help as soon as we can."

There was a silent, shrieking tension in the air as Vinay and Smita set off. The dangers they were likely to face were grim and real. If they did not find the camp site before dark, where would they spend the

night ? They had no defence against wild beasts. There was however no choice. And precious little time.

"Take care," whispered Viji, blinking back the tears behind her spectacles.

Smita and Vinay took the narrow path which seemed to lead towards the camp site. The path soon disappeared amidst a cluster of bushes and they had to push their way through. Their clothes tore as they got caught in the bramble. Nevertheless they made good progress. They had walked for about an hour, when Smita stopped and picked up an empty cigarette pack from the ground.

"Recently used," she said, sniffing it. She passed it to Vinay.

"Someone has been here not too long ago," said Vinay, looking around. "Shall we shout and see ?"

"Better not," said Smita. "We don't want a stampede of wild animals." She shuddered. "I am still weary of that wild buffalo which chased Soorie."

"Soorie went asking for trouble," said Vinay, but he secretly wished they had some sort of weapon. Just in case.

"Gosh, am I thirsty !" he went on. "Where is the stream ? It looked near enough from the tree. We seem to have walked for ages."

Suddenly they stopped and listened. The glorious, swishing sound of a waterfall. Smita and Vinay hurried in the direction of the sound and within minutes came upon a marvellous sight. A cascade of silvery foam that fell from the craggy slopes, crashing against the rocks below and then trickling away gently as a wide stream meandering its way into the forest.

Vinay threw his rucksack on the ground, kicked off his shoes and with a whoop of joy, ran towards the

stream. He knelt down and scooped up the water in thirsty mouthfuls. Laughing, Smita followed. The water was delicious and cool. They splashed it on their faces, washed their sore arms and then sat upon the rocks with their feet in the water.

"A few more minutes and then we better move on," said Vinay. "What do you think the time will be now ? After five ?"

"Guess so," said Smita. "I will get the bottle from my rucksack and fill some water." She walked up to where she had left her shoes and the rucksack and began to open it, quite unaware of the pair of eyes watching her from less than a few feet away.

* * *

The four kids looked on as Smita and Vinay walked away in the direction of the camp site and were lost from view.

"Guess we will just have to sit and wait," said Dilip, stretching out on the ground. He wanted very much to have gone instead of Vinay but Vinay was a better sprinter and more athletic. Smita of course could run like a deer. In any case Dilip knew that he had the responsibility of looking after the others.

"Wish Uncle would wake up and drink some water at least," said Viji. It is nearly twenty-four hours since the accident."

Viji knew a great deal more about her Uncle's condition than what the others realised. Her father was a surgeon and kept a lot of medical books in the house. An avid reader, she loved to pour into his books. She knew that after a head injury, the person sometimes went into a coma and never recovered. That was what

she was afraid of. Also, some needed urgent operations. And the leg. Would the bones knit together if not set soon and put in plaster ? What if the wound got infected ? She was afraid to remove the splint and look, in case it began to bleed.

Viji wished she were at home. She was so worn out and grubby and broken with worry and anxiety. She longed for a nice warm bath, a warm meal and a bed to sleep on. It was Sunday. Father would be at home relaxing in his garden chair with the newspaper. They had tea in the garden on Sundays, around this time. Mother fried *pakor*s or *vada*is. With the twins around, plates emptied as soon as they were filled.

I can't take this any more, thought Viji. She looked at young Soorie and Laila playing quietly a little distance away and knew she *had* to take it. No matter what happened or how long it lasted, she was a part of it. She could not buckle under.

Soorie and Laila were well into their game with the caterpillars. They built a mud fortress for the four caterpillars they had found and watched them munch their way through leaf after leaf. Chow tried to help by pawing up the earth but frightened them away instead.

Laila went hunting for fresh caterpillars, when she saw a bush full of purple berries. She had never seen such berries before but they seemed good enough to eat. She plucked a handful and took them over to Soorie.

"Have some," she offered, popping a few in her mouth. "They are sort of sweetish, sour..."

Viji saw them just in time. She leapt up and knocked the berries off their hands. "Spit it out both of you," she cried angrily. "Spit it out !"

Perplexed, Soorie and Laila spat the berries and rinsed their purple-stained mouths with water that Viji poured out for them.

"Poisonous berries, most likely," said Viji, glowering at them through her spectacles.

"How can you tell they are poisonous ?" asked Soorie with a sullen look in his eyes.

"Yes, you don't know till you have eaten them and then it may be too late," she snapped. "What is wrong with you two ? Don't you see we are in the middle of nowhere, without any help whatsoever ?"

Fuming, she went and sat by herself. Dilip had been watching her but he said nothing. The two youngsters did need to be ticked off now and then, but he was worried about Viji. She had become tense and jumpy. It was so unlike her. Poor girl, she was going through a lot, what with her Uncle so seriously ill and her brother now away. She must feel terrible. What could he do but hope that she would calm down ?

Dilip pulled out *Robinson Crusoe* from his rucksack and held it out to her. "Like to read ?" Viji nodded gratefully and took the book. Within minutes, she had lost herself in the magnificent tale of adventure.

They all heard the noise. Rustling and crackling of leaves and then voices. It could not be Vinay and Smita for they had gone the other way. As the kids wondered who it was, the voices grew louder and then they saw the two men.

"Here they are," said the one in front. He was a middle-aged man with a heavy, smooth paunch that sagged down through his red shirt.

"Get moving, kids. Over here !" snapped the other—a tall lean young man carrying a rifle. He jerked his

head towards the mango tree beneath which Viji sat with the stretcher next to her.

Dilip rose from where he was leaning against a tree stump. "Look we haven't done any harm. We..."

"Over here, if you know what is good for you," the man snarled. Dilip realised that it was futile to argue and walked to the tree.

"Is that your Land Rover there ?" the paunchy one asked.

"Yes, we..."

"Who's that ?" he said, pointing to the stretcher.

"Capt. Dev."

"He brought you kids here ?" he said, rolling his eyes. "He must be crazy."

"We lost our way," explained Dilip. "The signpost to the camp site had fallen."

"Yes, we saw it. That is what led to all this trouble, eh ? What happened to the Captain ?" he asked peering down at him.

"He fell into a pit," said Viji. "He has broken a leg and has a serious head injury."

"Soft in the head... ha !" laughed the lanky youth. "He will get pretty worse lying here."

"We carried him so far," said Dilip, trying his best to swallow his anger at the callous behaviour of the two men. "Two of our friends have gone in search of the camp site to get help."

"When did it happen ?"

"Last night."

He whistled and his long face looked leaner and longer. "Plucky, kids, you lot. To spend a night in the forest."

"Will you help us ?" asked Viji earnestly. "Will you help us get Uncle to the hospital ? Please. You must have got a vehicle."



"A jeep. But not much place in it."

"If you will only take Uncle to hospital, we will find our way," said Viji.

The men looked at each other ! "Look, girls," said the young man. "You kids have been trespassing in the forest where it is out of bounds for the public. You could be arrested for that."

"How about you ?" asked Dilip, unable to control himself. He had a strong suspicion that they were guilty of some worse crime than mere trespassing.

"We have some...er...job around here."

"Like cutting down trees and selling them ?"

As soon as he said it, Dilip knew that he should not have. The young man lunged forward and knocked him a hard blow in the jaw. Dilip sprang to retaliate but the man raised his rifle. His eyes were flat and hard. "Another step and I will send you into deeper sleep than your Uncle," he sneered. Then, he swung round abruptly as two small fists hit him hard in the back.

It was Laila, angry as a ruffled cat. "Don't you hit my brother, you big bully !"

At the same time Chow fell upon the man, snapping at him with great energy and tilting him off his feet.

"Call the wretched dog away !" he screamed.

"The dog seems to like you," grinned Soorie.

"Call him off or I will shoot !"

"Let go, Chow," said Soorie. "Let go. Good boy."

Chow came away disappointed and the man scrambled to his feet, scowling. The two strangers talked in low voices for a while. Then the fat one said, "You kids are in danger. Take our advice. Leave this Captain to die in peace. He is too far gone. He will never make it. Why risk your lives for someone who is almost beyond hope ? Hurry as soon as you

can *that* way." He pointed the way Smita and Vinay had gone. "You will reach the camp site in a few hours."

"That is, if you are lucky enough not to be attacked by any wild animals. There is a mad, wild buffalo roaming about. He is dangerous."

"M...Mad ?" stuttered Soorie.

"Raving."

"Won't you help us ?" pleaded Viji. She could not believe that anyone would be so heartless as not to help when they were in such a plight.

The men looked at each other. "Only kids, what harm can they do ?" said the fat man.

"We will help only if you leave the Captain behind," he said to the kids. "We can't be carrying a sick man all over the place. Certainly not to hospital. We are busy people, you understand ? We will drop you off near the sign post and then you will have to fend for yourselves." He rubbed his paunch and looked from one to the other. "That much we can do. And if you value your lives, you will agree."

"We value our Uncle's life just as much as ours," said Viji. "We would rather you took him instead of us. He is in urgent need of help."

Both men were taken aback at those words. "Stupid kids, leave them alone," said the lanky youth. "Let us get going before it is dark. Good luck with the buffalo !" he smirked.

They walked away, rustling and crackling the leaves as they had come. Then there was silence.

The black beast

Cool and refreshed, Vinay stepped out of the stream and bent to pick up the shoes. But he never did put

them on. His eyes were rivetted on the huge, black beast that stood within a few yards of Smita and of which she was unaware.

Horried, he watched as the buffalo charged on Smita. Vinay moved like lightning and flung his shoes at the beast with all the force in his arms.

"Run, Smita... Run !"

Smita was taken totally unawares. She toppled backwards and lay still, paralysed by fear. Vinay's shoe had hit the beast in the eye. It turned and lunged at Vinay, tossing its head in rage.

In that one blinding moment of terror, Vinay seemed to live out all the fears of his life. One swipe from those menacing horns could rip him open or a kick from the powerful hooves could break his limbs. The buffalo charged, and Vinay ducked. The beast was unable to slow its momentum and galloped forward several yards before braking to a halt. Vinay had gained a few precious seconds.

"Run, Smita...Run !"

He leapt after her and they raced full speed through the forest. Vinay was one step behind Smita and followed by the buffalo. Panting, tripping, falling, they crashed through the undergrowth, mindless of the cuts and stings that smarted on their faces, arms and legs. The hooves thundering close behind kept them on and on.

At last, the beast was tired and began to trail. Smita looked around and saw the fig tree. Breathlessly she signalled Vinay and began to climb. Struggling, heaving, clawing, they went up. The buffalo reached the tree just as Vinay straddled the first bough and was beyond its reach. Maddened by rage, it butted the tree with such force that Smita could feel the impact



where she was, half way up the tree. For several moments it stood clawing the earth with its hooves. Then it gave up and moved towards the stream.

Smita gripped the branch to stop herself from trembling. "Must be a mad buffalo," she said shakily. "It is not normal. I have read somewhere that they wait for hours to attack a victim."

"Calm down, we are all right here," grinned Vinay.

"You were terrific, Vinay. Thank you for saving my life," said Smita. "You were so brave."

At that moment of danger, there had been no time to be afraid. Now Vinay was frightened. Fear had a way of getting on top of you until it paralysed thinking. And now more than ever, they had to think clearly.

"How long do you think we will have to stay up here?" asked Smita.

"Quite a while, I guess," said Vinay mopping his face on the sleeve. "Unless you fancy another chase."

"It has really cooked up our plans," sighed Smita. "The others are depending on us."

They were both silent, thinking of their Uncle Dev. Every moment's delay would strain the thin string by which he seemed to hang on to life. How long could he manage without medical help?

Vinay spoke first. "You are right, we cannot just sit on a tree and wait for miracles." He closed his eyes and leaned back against the trunk for a moment, then he fished out a folding knife from his pocket. "Thank goodness, I have this in my pocket. We can make two wooden spears to defend ourselves with and then down we go."

Vinay chose a slender branch and cut through its base till it snapped off the main trunk. Together, they

plucked away the leaves and snipped off the twigs. Vinay whittled one end until it was sharp as a spear—a strong, sturdy weapon about a metre long.

“It is terrific,” said Smita, holding it jauntily in one hand. “My mother would surely have a fit if she saw me now, sitting on a tree in tattered clothes, with a spear in my hand!”

“I bet she will be proud of you when she hears all that you have been through,” said Vinay.

When the spears were ready, they came down cautiously and looked around. “The brute is nowhere in sight,” said Smita. “We will have to head for the stream, in any case.”

They had both been barefeet when they fled from the buffalo. Their feet were very sore but they managed to keep walking and reached the stream just as the sun dipped below the horizon.

“There he is...” whispered Smita, pointing to the bank of the stream where the buffalo lay fast asleep.

“Let us get our rucksacks and shoes,” said Vinay. They grabbed their things and got away without waking the buffalo.

Well out of its sight, Smita sat down to wear her shoes. “Didn’t you get yours, Vinay?”

“Can’t risk looking for them,” said Vinay. “I will manage somehow. Come on. The path is wider here. Let us hope it leads us to the camp site.”

They walked some distance before they could pick up courage to switch on the torch. The path appeared to be well-trodden and wider than before. Vinay found it tough without his shoes but he did not slow his pace even for a second.

They had walked for about an hour and the forest was less dense. Both were very, very tired and hungry

as lions. But there was nothing to do except press on and hope that the camp site was near.

The light from the torch began to dim and within a few minutes it went out all together. “Oh, blow!” said Vinay shaking the torch angrily. “It is no use. The batteries are dead.”

“Let us keep walking, there is some moonlight,” said Smita. After a while their eyes grew accustomed to the silvery light and they were able to see enough to keep to the path. Vinay had the uneasy feeling that they were on the wrong track. If not, why had they not reached?

“Aawch...!” he yelled, grabbing his left foot.

“What is it?” asked Smita, alarmed.

“I stepped on something,” groaned Vinay, staggering to the ground. “Uh... Take a look, will you?”

Smita was already kneeling beside him. A jagged piece of glass had pierced his foot and blood flowed from it. Smita felt chilled to the bone at the sight. “It’s a...piece of glass,” she stammered, face pale with nervousness. She couldn’t stand the sight of blood. Smita thought she was going to faint. If only Viji were with them, she would know what to do.

“Don’t just sit there, *do* something,” said Vinay, a trifle sharply. He knew that Smita squirmed at the sight of blood and wanted to jolt her out of her fear.

Smita opened her rucksack with trembling hands and took out the antiseptic and gauze. “You better sit on that tree stump while I take it out,” she said, calmly. “It will hurt, Vinay.”

“Just get on with it and stop dilly-dallying.”

Vinay clenched his jaws and was absolutely still. Pain shot through him like an electric current. “It is out!” said Smita. Vinay nodded and as she applied the

stinging antiseptic on the wound, he prayed that he shouldn't cry. Not on his life. Not in front of Smita who was being such a champion about it.

"I will see if I can walk," said Vinay, standing up. But he could not.

"You better not try, it will only get worse," said Smita. Darkness was closing in and without a torch, it would be pretty grim to carry on. "We will have to spend the night here and hope your foot is all right by the morning."

"Why don't you carry on?" said Vinay. "The camp site may not be far away."

"And leave you like this?" retorted Smita. "If that buffalo or any other beast attacks, you won't even be able to run."

So they spent the night there, leaning against a tree stump with nothing but light cardigans to protect them from the bitter cold. But they were so utterly worn out from lack of sleep and food and from the unbelievable hardships they had faced, that they fell asleep with their spears resting near them. Their exhaustion was complete, and they slept on till the first twittering of birds awakened Smita.

"How is the foot?" she asked Vinay as soon as he opened his eyes. He stood up and tried to take a few steps, but staggered down, wincing with pain. "Look Smita, you have got to carry on," he said, earnestly. "Everything depends on you. You have got to do it alone."

"Okay," said Smita, picking up her spear. "I will be back with help. I promise."

"Take care, Smita."

Vinay watched as she hurried along the path—lonely, willowy figure with nothing but a wooden

spear to protect her. To think that only yesterday he had thought of her as a mere hoity-toity, powder-and-puff type of girl. Ashamed of himself, Vinay decided to apologise properly when he had the chance.

Smita raced on as fast as she could. Vinay, Uncle Dev and everybody else depended on her. She had to find help or they were all done in. Gosh! It was Monday morning. Their parents expected them home that afternoon. There was sure to be panic when they failed to turn up.

Smita kept running. She was a sprinter, proud of her speed. The long hours of practice in the school grounds now stood her in good stead. Relax as you run, her coach had taught her, when she practised for the Thousand Metres Race. Relax. Breathe deeply and maintain speed. On and on she went, until every step was an effort. The path had become tortuous. It climbed up and then down again and again. It snaked along until it reached a more open area. Then when the sun was high up, she came upon a sight that took her by surprise. A well—a primitive type, surrounded by tall grass. And a girl, about her own age drawing water in a round pitcher! Beyond the well about hundred metres away, Smita could see a cluster of huts. What have I stumbled into, wondered Smita, for surely it was not the camp site.

At the village

So sure was Smita of reaching the camp site that she was not prepared for anything else. When she saw instead, a rustic village girl, drawing water from the well, she just stood and stared.

The village girl had more reason to be amazed by the bedraggled figure that stood before her. With tattered clothes, bruised face, dishevelled hair and, to top it all, a wooden spear in hand ! The girl dropped her pitcher full of water and ran.

"Wait !" cried Smita, but her voice was drowned by the loud splash, as the pitcher swayed on the wooden cross-beam of the well and toppled into it.

The girl ran towards the hut, calling. A small group of people hurried out when they heard her excited voice. There were two men, a woman and a young boy. The men were bare-chested and wore *dhotis* folded up to their knees. The woman and the girl wore *saris* wound between the legs and tucked in at the back. Their hair was coiled neatly on top of the head. The girl wore a red hibiscus flower in her hair.

Smita felt uneasy when she saw them approach her with hostile, suspicious looks on their faces. Her mouth was dry with nervousness. She wanted to explain how she had come there, but her tongue seemed to stick in her mouth and she could not begin. The young boy came closer, pointed to the wooden spear in her hand and began to laugh. Smita looked down at herself and smiled, in spite of her nervousness.

That seemed to break the tension. The elder of the two men approached Smita and stood with his arms folded across the chest. He was small and thin with scanty white hair on his head. "My name is Chenna," he said, in a peculiar form of Hindi which he spoke in a sing-song voice. "I am the headman of our village. Who are you ? Why have you come here ?"

"We came to the Panali Game Reserve on a camping trip," replied Smita, "seven of us."

"Where are the others ?"

Smita explained as briefly and clearly as possible. "We lost our way. Our uncle, who brought us in a vehicle, fell into a pit and is seriously injured. His life is in danger."

Chenna sighed in sympathy. "Where is the man ?"

"In the forest beyond the stream. We were unable to carry him far. So two of us came ahead to look for the camp site and get help, but my friend injured his foot on the way. I had to leave him and come alone." Smita looked at the man in earnest. "We are badly in need of help."

Chenna went back to the others and spoke rapidly. Smita could catch a few words. "Stupid town people ... wandering in the forest... poor girl..."

He turned to Smita and said. "You took the wrong path from the stream and missed the camp site. It is quite a distance from here. Never mind, we will help you. Come, have a bath and eat first. When you are rested, we can go and fetch the others."

"Thank you, you are very kind," said Smita gratefully, "but I am so worried about the others. My friend is all by himself and unable to walk. Do you think we could bring him here ?"

"How far is he from here ?"

"I left him more than an hour ago, along the path that leads to the stream."

"Don't worry," said Chenna, seeing her troubled face. "I will send my son Kariya with Subba. They will bring him here in no time." He signalled to the young boy who ran behind the hut and appeared a moment later astride a pale brown donkey. He listened to his father's instructions, excitement writ all over his face.

"*Aiyaah* Subba !" he said to the donkey and rode away along the path that Smita had come on.

"He is happy to have an excuse to roam in the forest rather than graze the goats," said Chenna.

"Are you not afraid of wild animals ?" asked Smita. "Your village is so close to the forest. Isn't it dangerous ?"

"Not of the wild animals so much as the nasty men who come in lorries and cut down the beautiful trees," Chenna said.

"I thought there is a law against the cutting of trees in a forest."

"Who is to stop them ?" he said, scratching his head. "We are powerless and they know it. It has all got to do with money."

"Karpi, show the girl where to have a bath," called out Chenna's wife to the young girl. "I will get the food ready."

Karpi led Smita to the back of the hut where there was a thatched shelter with flat stones on the ground and a large pitcher of water, but no soap. Karpi gave Smita an oblong sponge-like fibre to scrub herself. "I will wait outside," she said and left Smita to have her bath.

Smita shivered as she poured the cold water but felt refreshed and clean when she had finished. She had to wear the same clothes though she managed to fish out the comb from her rucksack and tidied her hair. Smita wished now that she had listened to her father and worn some tough clothes. Her beautiful, lemon-yellow salwar kameez was now a brown, tattered mess.

Karpi led her into the hut which was dark but spotlessly clean. The doorway and the thatched roof were so low that Smita could have touched them with her

hands. When she got accustomed to the darkness inside, she saw Karpi's mother lift a steaming bowl of rice from the fire place. "Sit down," she said, pointing to the floor. "You must be very hungry."

Karpi placed a banana leaf before her and the mother served a delicious meal of rice, *dhal* and vegetables. Smita ate hungrily, enjoying every morsel and then drank the bowl of thick, creamy buttermilk. The girl who used to pick and choose what she wanted to eat at home, found that this was one of the best meals she had ever eaten.

When she had washed her hands, Smita followed Karpi and her mother to the open yard in front of the hut. She watched Karpi as she spread a basketful of red chillies on a mat to dry.

"Are you never afraid of the wild animals ?" asked Smita.

Karpi looked up, her face screwed up against the sun. "Sometimes. The elephants are at times dangerous. Tigers and wolves attack only if one strays too far into the forest. If we respect their territory, they don't trouble us."

"We have heard that a mad, wild buffalo is roaming about," said Karpi's mother, sitting on her haunches next to Smita. "The men have been trying to kill it for some time now."

"Is it mad ?" said Smita, shivering, "We have seen it. It chased Soorie yesterday and tried to attack Vinay and me by the stream. It was awful."

"You have been through an awful lot, poor girl," said the woman when she heard about the buffalo. "How upset your parents will be when you tell them everything."

Those words jerked Smita back into the grimness of

their problems. It would soon be midday and their parents would expect them back. "You will be hungry when you come, I will keep lunch ready," her mother had said.

Listlessly Smita stood up and looked along the path towards the forest. When, oh, when would their trials end ?

* * *

Vinay had been alone for nearly two hours and he was bored. He felt it was ages since Smita had gone. He tried talking to a wild fowl but it took fright and scuttled away; two partridges strutted about socialising with each other and they ignored him; a tree full of parrots chattered overhead.

Vinay touched his injured foot and grimaced. What an idiotic thing he had done, throwing his shoes at the buffalo, instead of picking up a stone. If not for that, he would have been away with Smita and come back with some help by now. What was the girl up to, any way ? It was ages and ages since she had gone. What did she care if he was gored by the buffalo or mauled by some other wild beast ? Fear clutched at his heart as he looked wearily about him. He was utterly helpless in case of attack. Couldn't run, couldn't fight, couldn't climb a tree.

Of course, he could pray. He was not the type to ask for favours or anything. That he had to make clear. 'But please God, don't let any wild beast do me in now. I am only thirteen and...'

A beautiful, spotted deer bounded across the path and then another. They stood for a while, heads raised, ears pricked forward, listening. Then they leapt away

into the shrubs and were gone. The partridges and the wild fowl flapped away in panic. The parrots on the tree rose shrieking into the sky in a flutter of green.

Vinay grew tense. What was the panic about ? He looked around but saw nothing. Then he heard the trumpeting, loud and close. It was an elephant, he was sure of it. He had heard them a number of times at the zoo. They were huge and harmless. But of wild elephants, he was not sure.

Vinay did not have long to wait. The elephant came thudding through the forest, his immense feet trampling bushes, crushing shrubs and snapping branches like twigs. He was a lone wild tusker. He looked neither to the right nor left but charged straight ahead.

In that split second, Vinay somehow dragged himself back on his haunches, once, twice. He saw the elephant come headlong. Its legs, like massive pillars, went pounding past him. Vinay closed his eyes. His teeth chattered and his breath seemed to catch in the throat. When he opened his eyes, the elephant had gone. One step this way and he would have been crushed to death.

Was it luck ? Or was it his earnest prayer a moment ago ?

Not a drop . . .

When the two men had left, Dilip sat on the ground, nursing his sore jaw. "Something fishy about those guys," he said. "They are up to no good."

"How can they be so heartless ?" fumed Viji, bending over the stretcher to adjust the pillow for Capt. Dev. "They actually suggested that we leave Uncle. Huh !"

"It's a good thing they are gone," said Dilip. "Let us hope the people at the camp site are more helpful."

"Is there anything at all to eat?" asked Soorie rubbing his stomach. "We have had nothing since breakfast."

"You forgot the milk toffee," reminded Viji. "Laila and you can finish it, I guess. Uncle is not going to eat his share."

"Soorie can have both, I don't want it," said Laila.

Dilip looked up, astonished. "What is wrong, Lol? Never heard you say 'no' to food." He leaned forward and felt her forehead. "Mum says that if Laila is not hungry then she is brewing up some illness. Viji, have a feel."

Viji felt Laila's bounding pulse and hot, flushed cheeks. "Yes, she is burning with fever. Do you feel ill, Laila?"

"Got a headache," said Laila.

"I will give you a tablet to bring down the fever," said Viji, pushing the spectacles firmly on her nose. "Then you will lie down and rest, no fuss."

Laila nodded meekly. When Viji spoke in that particular voice, she meant business and no one dared to disobey her. Dilip pulled out two blankets and spread them beneath the mango tree. He folded them lengthwise and secured three ends with large safety pins. Then he rolled a towel and placed it as a pillow.

"Your sleeping bag is ready, Laila," he said, "In you go."

Viji knelt beside the feverish girl and sponged her with a wet towel to try and bring the fever down. Laila was very restless and tossed about for a long time. She often asked for water but they had to give it in small amounts as there was precious little left.

Darkness closed in but there was no sign of Vinay and Smita. The children were silent, hoping against hope that by some miracle help would arrive. Each dreaded the thought of spending a second night in the forest.

"Soorie, give me a hand," said Dilip, suddenly rising. "Let us spread the blankets and make the sleeping bags for the three of us. Looks like we have to live it out here another night."

Viji bit her lip and stared into the gathering darkness as the two boys laid out the blankets. Laila's fever had come down a little and she slept peacefully. She needed more water, plenty of it but there were only a few mouthfuls left. Capt. Dev remained the same. His pulse was even and there was no rise in temperature. Viji was worried sick about both of them.

Another night. How was one to sleep in the midst of thirst, hunger, worry and fear? 'This will be the longest night of my life,' thought Viji. The sounds of the forest were now more familiar but no less fearful. The howling of the wolves was the worst. It sent an icy chill through Viji for she imagined that the howling was nearer than on the first night.

What on earth had happened to Smita and Vinay? They had left hours ago. It was so easy to lose one's way in the forest, especially in the dark. Viji stifled her sobs, wishing with all her heart that she could shake away the crushing burden of fear. What was it her father always told them? Fear, not danger is the real enemy. Overcome fear and danger will take care of itself. *Be fearless. Be fearless.* Viji said it over and over again in her mind until she grew calm and drifted off to sleep.

Soorie was the first to wake up in the morning.

His mouth felt hot and dry; his throat was raw and stinging. He was so thirsty. He got up and picked up the water can that lay beside Viji and guiltily drank it to the last drop.

It didn't help. He wanted more, gallons of it, before his thirst could be quenched. Soorie thought longingly of the stream they had seen from the tree-top. He licked his dry, parched lips and decided he would go to the stream. He could drink his fill and bring water for the others before they woke up. He had to hurry. Soorie picked up the can and walked in the direction that Smita and Vinay had gone.

"Soorie, hold it, where are you off to?"

It was Dilip.

"To the stream to get some water," said Soorie, pleading with his eyes. "I will fill the can and bring enough for everyone. *Don't* stop me, Dilip." He began to run.

Dilip sprang after Soorie and pulled him back by the collar. "I will fust you black and blue if you dare go off on your own," he said angrily. "Have you forgotten what happened yesterday? Nearly got yourself gored to death by a buffalo. We know it is mad."

Soorie shook himself free and glared back at Dilip. "I need water," he said hoarsely. "Can't you see..." He did not want to cry but the tears were smarting in his eyes.

"Pipe down, junior," said Dilip, throwing an arm around him, "Don't let us make a scene. Don't. You stay here, I will get the water."

"What is to stop the buffalo from getting you?"

"I will take the gun," said Dilip. Carefully, he loaded the gun as his father had shown him and slid the safety catch in place. He took the water can from Soorie.

"Look after them, Soorie," he said and walked away.

When Viji woke up, she ached all over from sleeping on hard ground for the second night. Was it Monday or Tuesday? They had left home on Saturday and spent two nights in the forest. So it was...she was too tired to think clearly. Viji fumbled for her spectacles, put them on and looked around. Soorie sat a few feet away, resting his elbows on his knees. Chow sat next to him, listless with thirst.

"Where is Dilip?" asked Viji.

"He has gone to the stream to get water," said Soorie, staring vacantly into space.

Viji felt uneasy. She was used to seeing Soorie the nine-year old dynamite, always up to mischief. This was a different Soorie. He seemed to have no fight, no mischief left in him. She could see the tears shining in his eyes.

"It won't be long now, Soorie," Viji said. "They will be back soon, I am sure of it."

But she wasn't. She wasn't sure of anything except that she was thirsty and hungry. Her legs were weak and wobbly. When had they eaten last? Yesterday morning—the breakfast of eggs and porridge. And the milk toffees Laila had snuggled in.

Wearily, Viji knelt down beside Capt. Dev and tried to wake him. "Uncle, Uncle..." she shook him gently.

He moaned and moved a little. "Water...water..."

* * *

Three o'clock. Monday afternoon. Dr. Chandra paced up and down the dining room, his brow creased with worry. "Dev was sure they would return by

noon," he said to his wife. "They were to start from Panali at the crack of dawn. Wonder what is holding them up?"

"It is the kids," said his wife, as she cleared away the plates. "Impossible to get the lot of them up and ready so early. Poor Dev, must be up to his neck with their mischief. I don't think he will ever offer to take them again."

* * *

It was around noon that Vinay saw the most delightful sight, of a young boy galloping full speed down the path on a donkey.

"Hoi, Subba, stop !" the boy yelled. The donkey jerked to a halt and the boy, jumped off. He wiped the sweat from his face and grinned at Vinay. "I came looking for you," he said. "She told me your name but I forgot."

"Vinay."

"Ah yes. That girl, she is at home. Come, you ride on Subba."

"And you?"

"I will walk," he said cheerfully. "What a dirty mess you are in." He picked up Vinay's spear. "This isn't much good for killing."

"Better than nothing," said Vinay. He hesitated for a moment, then mounted the donkey with the spear in hand.

"*Aiyaah* Subba!" the boy yelled and they were off. The donkey was fast and the boy, who was no bigger than Soorie, kept up without any effort.

"What is your name?" asked Vinay.

"Kariya."

Vinay realised that Smita had not reached the camp site. "Where do you live?" he asked.

"We are a small village at the fringe of the forest," said Kariya. "Twenty people. We weave baskets and sell them in a town 30 kms. away."

"Is there a hospital in that town?"

"Yes, a big hospital," said Kariya. "But your foot, my mother can treat it."

"No, I wasn't thinking about my foot," said Vinay. "Tell me how do you folks get to the town."

"On our bullock cart. There is a bus which is much faster but it is crowded and dirty. We prefer the bullock cart."

Subba kept up a fast pace and soon they had reached the cluster of huts. Smita came running to greet Vinay and tell him how she had lost the way.

"They are good people, willing to help us," she said. "Have your bath and eat first, I will tell you all about it."

While Vinay had his bath, the smell of food cooking in the hut, made him dizzy with hunger. He devoured a great pile of rice and vegetables, then asked for more. Vinay ate so much that he could hardly rise. "I think I have eaten enough for the whole day!" he said, but an hour later when Kariya offered him a banana, he ate it without a murmur.

"The villagers have a herb remedy which, they say, is excellent for healing," said Smita. "It will ease the pain away as well. Want to try it?"

Karpi's mother brought a green paste made of ground leaves in a mud cup. She cleaned Vinay's foot with warm water, applied the paste and then bound it firmly with clean cloth. "Rest it for a few hours and you will feel better," she said.

"Thanks, I feel better already," grinned Vinay. He was staring at Smita and wondering what was different. She was wearing the same clothes but... Oh yes, she had her hair coiled in a bun on top of her head and, like Karpi, wore a red hibiscus flower in it.

"You've been terrific Smita, coming all this way on your own," he said. "I am sorry I behaved like a beast, before...before we started off on the trip."

"Forget it," said Smita with a radiant smile. "Tell me, how is the new hair-style?"

"Stunning! And very practical."

The rescue

The exhaustion seemed to fall away from Vinay after the meal. But for his injured foot, he felt fit and strong.

"Let us go and get the others now," he said, rising to his feet. "They must be really starved. We will need some help to carry Uncle."

"Karpi's father Chenna has gone to call three more men," said Smita, pointing in the direction of the other huts. "I will go with them, Vinay. You better stay back and rest your foot."

"Try stopping me," said Vinay, taking a step forward. His foot was quite sore but he did not want to be left out of the excitement. "A silly old cut on my foot is not going to keep me back."

"You listen to me, Vinay Chandra," said Smita sharply. "Your foot needs rest, at least for a few hours. You know it? She saw the crestfallen look on his face. "Please, Vinay, be reasonable."

Reluctantly, Vinay agreed.

Chenna appeared with three younger men and they were ready to start. "Here is the food and water for the children," said his wife. She gave him a bundle tied in cloth and a deerskin bag filled with water.

They set off. Smita, Karpi, Chenna and the three men. Subba the donkey cantered beside them with the bundle and the deerskin bag on his back. The men carried sharp, pointed spears that gleamed and flashed in the sun as they walked quick-footed through the forest.

Vinay sat in front of the hut with Kariya and, watched them go. He felt bleak and left out. But could hardly have managed the long walk and would have been more of a burden to the others. Thank goodness, Smita was all right. That girl was tough. My word, she was tough! After all the walking and running she had done yesterday, she had gone again without flinching.

In the quiet of the village, Vinay had time to brood. And he brooded. He felt deep down a guilt for having been responsible for the mess they were in. It was his foolish pride which had prevented him from admitting that he did not know. He liked to pretend, just by sounding sure, that what he said would become real. It happened that way sometimes but not all the time. Now he had cooked the goose not just for himself but for all of them. The marvellous camping trip that they had talked of day after day was now not so marvellous after all.

With an unhappy sigh Vinay hobbled to the spot a couple of huts away, where several women and some children were busy weaving cane into baskets.

* * *

It was already past midday but inside the forest it was cool. Weariness had gone out of Smita. All she wanted to do was walk faster and faster until they found the others. Karpi chattered constantly in a sing-song voice like her father's. She was a bubbly youngster of twelve or thirteen and had known no other life but that of the village and the forest. She knew every tree and flower, every bird and insect around her. It was amazing.

"Who has taught you so much?" asked Smita. Karpi seemed like a walking encyclopaedia of Nature.

"When I was a baby, my mother used to bring me here on her back. She used to come here to collect firewood," said Karpi. "When I learnt to walk, I began to help pick mushrooms, berries and fruit. Kariya and I climbed trees—mango, fig, jack fruit—so many trees. Sometimes we came with father. He told us many things."

"Do your men hunt wild animals?"

"They used to hunt deer, wild boar and even, buffalo. But now they only hunt rabbits, partridges and wild fowl. We avoid the parts of the forest where the dangerous animals roam. It is rare for them to wander this side."

"What do your people do for a living?" asked Smita curiously.

"We weave cane baskets and sell them to town. Everyone in the village knows how to weave."

"How often do you go to town?"

"The men go at least once a month. Father takes Kariya and me three times a year."

"Does it take you a long time to reach the town?" asked Smita.

"Our bullocks Malla and Murali are very fast," said Karpi proudly. "We set off at daybreak and reach by late afternoon."

Smita did some quick thinking. At that pace they would never be able to get Uncle Dev to hospital before dark. There had to be something faster than the bullock cart.

"Is the main road very far from the village?" she asked.

"A kilometre, perhaps."

"Is that all?"

"Yes. We are at the fringe of the forest. That is the main problem."

"Problem?"

"Those horrible men who come in lorries," said Karpi. "They come to pester us. They want to buy our baskets but pay very little. Our men prefer to go to the town and sell in the market place. That way they earn much more."

"Then what is stopping them?"

Karpi looked at her in astonishment. "You don't know these men. They are very wicked. They threaten us with guns and say they will set fire to our village. We are always afraid of them."

"That is awful," said Smita. "Has your father complained to the police?"

"I don't think they would listen to him against those men," said Karpi sadly.

"Are they the men who cut down the trees in the forest?" Smita asked.

"Yes. They say they have permission from the Government. Father says it is a lie. But we are not in a position to do anything."

Smita stopped abruptly. "That is the tree Vinay

and I climbed when the buffalo chased us," she said, pointing. "We made our spears from the branches of the tree." She shivered when she thought of their grim ordeal the day before.

"You children have been very brave," said Chenna. "That beast is extremely dangerous. We have to kill him before he kills someone."

Smita's pulse quickened as they approached the stream. She could see someone in the water.

"Dilip!"

Smita ran shouting. It was Dilip all right, knee deep in water with his trousers rolled up and his rifle resting against a rock.

"Where are the others?" Smita asked, alarmed.

"Near the mango tree where you left us yesterday," said Dilip. He was trying hard to control the tremor in his voice from the overwhelming relief that surged through him. "We were all maddened by thirst and I came to fetch water. But that buffalo—he nearly got me. I shot him." He pointed to a clump of trees some distance from the stream. "I...I am not sure if he is dead."

The men hurried towards the site that Dilip had pointed to. A few moments later Chenna returned. "The beast is dead," he said to Dilip. "You shot him in the neck. That was very good. The others will bury him and then join us."

"Good show, Dilip!" said Smita, thumping him on the back. "Fancy killing a mad, wild buffalo all by yourself."

Dilip flushed with pride and gratefully took the bananas offered by Karpi. "Where is Vinay?" he asked, as he ate.

"He is at the village where these people live," said

Smita. "Come, we will talk as we go along. How is Uncle Dev?"

"Not much change," said Dilip. "And Laila has fever." He quickened his steps. "Let us hurry. They are desperate for water."

They talked as they walked, Smita telling Dilip about their ordeals since the previous day. Dilip in turn related to her about the intrusion by the two men who refused to help them.

"Thank goodness, I bumped into these village folk who have been so helpful," said Smita. "God knows what I would have done without their help."

Both Dilip and Smita became tense and excited as they neared the mango tree. They began to walk faster until they suddenly heard an eager bark ahead of them. The next moment, Chow came flashing through the bushes and leaped at them in joyful greeting.

"Hold it Chow, hold it!" laughed Dilip. "Give me a chance to meet the others."

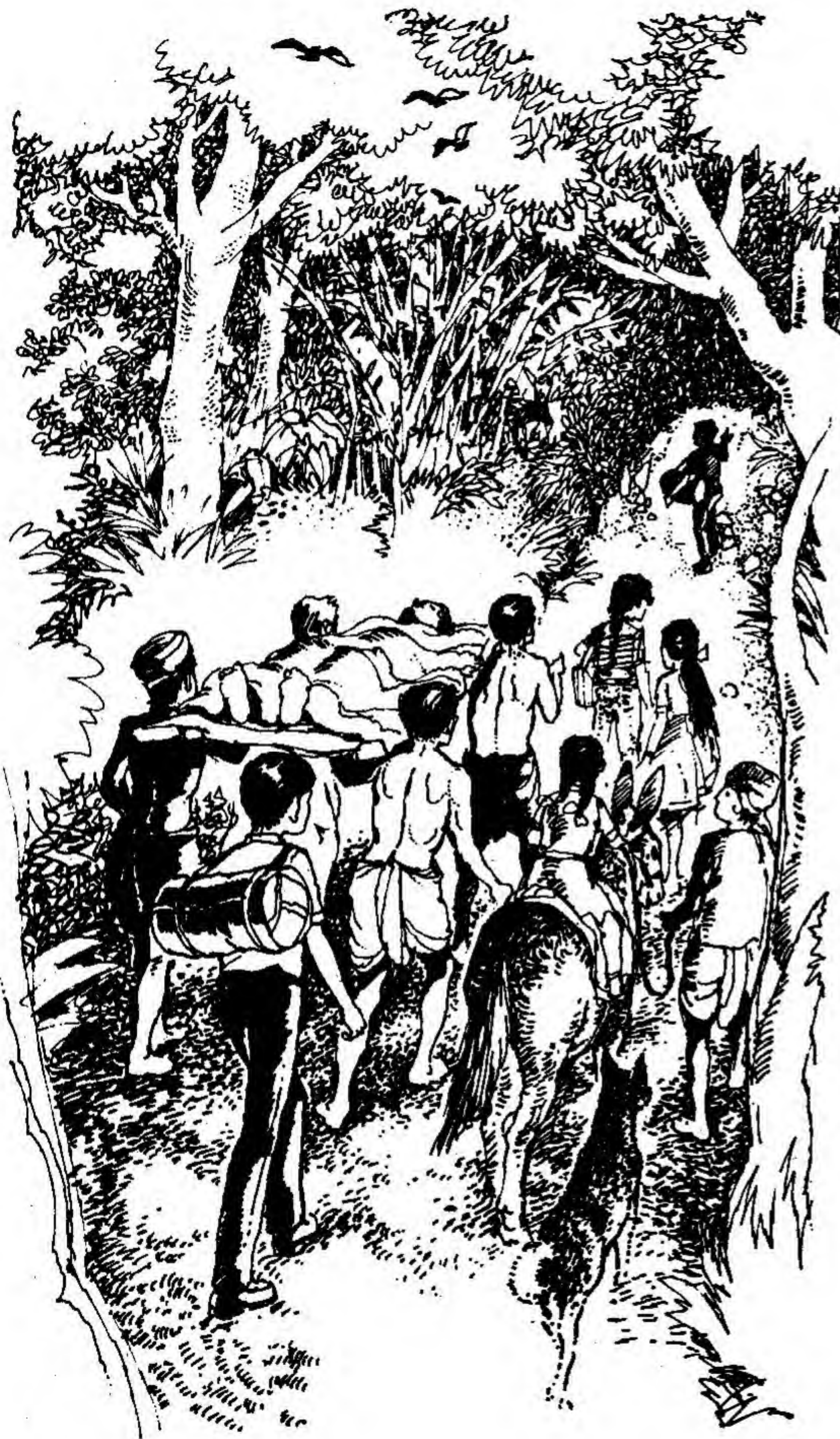
Viji, Laila and Soorie were thrilled to see them. Laila hung on to Dilip's arm as if she would never let him go.

"First, the water," said Dilip, reaching for the deerskin bag. They drank thirstily. Viji knelt beside Capt. Dev. He opened his eyes and drank the water that she poured through his parched lips.

"He looks so pale and weak," said Smita, fear clutching her heart. Capt. Dev definitely seemed worse to her than the day before. "Let us hurry."

"First, you children will eat," said Chenna. "Karpi, what are we waiting for? Spread the leaves."

They sat in a circle beneath the tree while Karpi placed the shining green banana leaves before them.



The hungry children enjoyed a riotous feast of rice, tapioca curry and green mango chutney. As they ate Smita related all that had happened to them. "The three of you have had a rough time," she said, when she finished.

"Soorie looked after us well," said Viji. "He got us some wild figs and they were very good."

As soon as they had finished, the four men lifted the stretcher on their shoulders and began to walk. Dilip helped Laila onto the donkey's back and Chow ran alongside. It was a strange looking crowd that began the long trek through the forest. Dilip glanced at his watch. It was ten minutes to four.

Beanpole, Fatty

न्यू इंग्लिश स्कूल
दिल्लक रोड, पुणे-३०

Vinay hobbled back and forth to test his injured foot. There was no doubt about it. The severe pain had eased off to a dull, bearable ache.

"Your herbal medicine is very good," he said to Chenna's wife, as he sat down on a large, smooth stone and watched the women weave the baskets.

There were three women and a young girl, perhaps eight or nine years old. A few paces away, two men sat beneath a shady tree and spliced bamboo into long strips of cane. Kariya carried the strips in heaps and placed them before the women. The women worked swiftly, using up cane strips as steadily as he brought them. Squatting on the ground, they chattered in high-pitched, sing-song voices. Their rhythmic teamwork never stopped and the baskets seemed to grow in front of one's eyes. Vinay watched, fascinated.

The young girl, whom the others called Sulu, held a

strip of cane in front of her and bent it into a loop. One of the women wove another strip of cane into it and went on strip after strip until the shallow basket began to take shape. When the lower half was done, she tossed it to the woman next to her. She made the upper, slightly complicated portion, working with shorter strips of cane, so that the basket narrowed towards the tip. Then she reinforced the basket all around by braiding vertical strips. When she had finished, she handed it to Chenna's wife, who used a broader strip of cane to make the handle. The work was tedious and intricate, but they worked deftly until the basket was done.

"How many baskets do you weave in a day?" asked Vinay.

"About eight or nine, sometimes ten," said Chenna's wife. "We have our housework to attend to, the men have to graze the cows and goats. Then there are the sugar-cane and paddy fields to work in."

"Do you sell the baskets in town?"

"In the town 60 kms. away if we are lucky," said one of the men. "If we sell them directly in the market place, then no one can cheat us. But that is not always possible."

"Why?" asked Vinay.

His question was answered in a totally unexpected way. Kariya, who had gone to fetch water from the well, came running back. "They are here!" he yelled. "They have come!"

Vinay turned round eagerly but the welcome cheer died on his lips when he saw that it wasn't his friends who had come but two strangers. One was fat and paunchy, the other was lean and thin and he carried a gun. Vinay noticed that a change had come over

the villagers. They stopped work and stared sullenly at the two men.

"You have been busy today, I see!" said the lanky youth with a leering smile. "Are you ready, then?"

One of the village women sprang to her feet with a wild, desperate look in her eyes. "You will not get anything from us today!" she screamed. "We will not let you snatch away our livelihood."

"We have come to give you your livelihood, not snatch it away," said Fatty, puffing insolently on his cigarette. "We only want to help. We collect the baskets and sell them on your behalf. Save you the trouble of going to town. And you are not even grateful!"

"You leave us alone and we will look after ourselves," said the woman, wiping her face nervously.

"We will see about that," snarled the young man taking a threatening step forward. "Our jeep is parked near the well. Get moving and stack the baskets inside. Act stubborn and you will get a taste of our strong medicine." Leering, he leaned against the gun.

"Look mister, you can't force them to sell their baskets if they don't want to."

The men swung round in surprise. They had not noticed Vinay till then, for he was partly hidden by the tree.

"Who are you to meddle in our business?" asked Fatty.

"It doesn't matter who I am," said Vinay. He had seen the gun and knew these men were dangerous. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he could hear a warning. 'Vinay, careful'. But it was his nature to be impulsive.

The fat man muttered something to his friend. Then

ignoring Vinay, they walked towards the women. "What are you waiting for? Bring all the baskets. Don't try hiding any."

Vinay could not believe that the villagers would give in without a fight. "Don't listen to those crooks," he said angrily. "You know they are cheating you."

He saw the hopelessness on their faces and turned to the two strangers. "At least wait till Chenna and the others return," he said. "You will have to discuss it with them first."

"Discuss?" laughed the youth. "Look here, young man, I don't know how you got mixed up with the village folk, but you just keep out of this deal. Okay? Or, I will knock you into pulp."

If there was one thing Vinay hated it was being bullied. He was a bit confused in his mind about the sale of the baskets but he knew that these men were bullies. They bullied the villagers and that for Vinay was just not on. He sprang forward, his injured foot forgotten, and blocked the way.

"I won't let you touch the baskets," he said, his face flushed with anger.

"Get out of my way," cried Fatty, pushing him. Vinay brought his fist forward and sent it crashing into the fat nose.

"Oww...!"

Vinay heard the cry and then he felt a hard blow across his head. The ground seemed to rise, faces reeled before him and then everything went blank.

* * *

When Vinay came round, he could hear a strange whirring sound in his head. And the smell of petrol.

A strong smell of petrol that was nauseating. He could feel the hard floor knock against his chest. Vinay tried to move but found that his hands and feet were tied. He opened his eyes and looked. He had been trussed like a chicken and flung in the back of the jeep with baskets that pressed and suffocated him.

Vinay lay there, hardly able to breathe, let alone think of what was happening to him. He had a hazy recollection of the scene at the village, the two strangers Fatty and Beanpole. The bullies! One of them had knocked him on the head and he had gone blank. Yes, that was it. So they had managed to get the baskets from the poor villagers. But what did they plan to do with him? Where were they taking him?

Vinay tried to find a comfortable position amidst the cane baskets that jabbed him cruelly from all sides, but the jolting vehicle kept him thudding against the hard floor.

Suddenly the jeep halted. Its engine stopped.

"What shall we do with him?" It was Fatty's voice. "I still think it was unwise to have carted him along. He was knocked out cold, anyway. We should have left him in the village."

"I want to teach the young busybody a lesson," said Beanpole. "He won't go meddling in other people's affairs anymore. This is a good place as any to dump him."

"It is a bit cruel, isn't it?" argued Fatty.

"Don't be a chicken," sneered his partner, "someone is sure to pick him up."

Fatty was still not convinced. "He may die of heat stroke or something," he said, alarmed. "Then we will be in trouble."

"Like hell we will." Vinay heard the back door of

the jeep open. He closed his eyes and pretended to be unconscious. "He is still in dreamland. Come on, give me a hand."

They dragged him roughly from beneath the baskets and carried him a few yards, then flung him hard on the ground. "I hope he is nicely fried in the sun before someone comes along." Vinay heard Beanpole's lothsome laugh. "By the time he is salvaged and in a position to tell tales on us, we will be in Darjeeling having the time of our lives."

The door of the jeep slammed shut. The engine came to life and the vehicle moved away.

When the sound of the jeep faded away, Vinay opened his eyes and looked around. He was in a shallow ditch on the side of the main road. By heaving himself, he could just about see the road. The sun sizzled overhead and there was not a tree in sight. In a few minutes Vinay could feel his skin burn as if he was on fire.

A fine mess he had got himself into. All because of his own impulsiveness. Act first and think later... ! When would he learn to be cautious? His friends would return to the village and learn about what had happened. They had enough problems to tackle and now they would have to go hunting for him.

'If the sun doesn't go down soon, I will be roasted alive,' thought Vinay miserably.

Dalitpur

The phone rang for the third time in fifteen minutes. Wearily, Dr. Chandra reached for the receiver. It was Smita's mother, Mrs. Parekh on the line.

"Is there no news of them yet ?" she asked anxiously.

"Can you put a call through and find out ?"

"There are no phones at Panali camp site," said Dr. Chandra. "I am trying to make contact with the nearest town. I will call you back soon."

He kept the receiver back knowing that it would ring again and again. Tense, worried parents, anxious for news of their children. "It is four o'clock now, I will have to get in touch with the police," he said to his wife. "This isn't a minor problem that is holding them up. Dev would have phoned to say they would be late."

He saw the fear on his wife's face and wished he had not said it aloud.

"Do you think there has been an accident ?" she asked.

"Don't let us jump to conclusions dear," Dr. Chandra reassured his wife as he began to dial. "I am ringing up the police."

* * *

Laila felt exhausted after the fever but she loved the ride on the donkey. And Subba was good with children. Karpi and Kariya had trained him well.

"Ooo...Lovely !" squealed Laila with delight. "I will tell everyone in school about you, Subba, I really will."

Subba seemed to have heard, for he pricked up his ears and set off at a brisk pace ahead of the others.

The walk to the village was a long one. Viji longed to see Vinay. At first, she had been furious with him when he had pretended to know the way to the camp site. But Viji could never be angry with her twin brother for long. When Smita told her how he had charged

against the mad buffalo, Viji felt she would burst with pride. That was Vinay all over. Impulsive, but full of fight and courage. Now after all that, he had gone and stepped on a piece of glass and had to stay back at the village. Viji knew how awful he must feel and longed to see him.

"How much farther do we have to go?" she asked Smita. They had already crossed the stream and it seemed they had walked a great distance.

"It is not too far now," said Smita.

It was Uncle Dev that they were worried about. Every single one of them. From Dilip to Viji, Smita, Soorie and Laila. They hoped with all their hearts that they could get him to hospital soon.

"I have been talking about it to Chenna," said Dilip, coming alongside Smita and Viji. "If we use the bullock cart, we will not be able to reach the hospital today. Our best bet, he says, is to walk from the village to the main road and wait for some vehicle to pass by."

"And hope that they won't be nasty like the two men we met in the forest," said Viji, shivering at the thought.

"From your description of the men, Karpi feels she knows them," said Smita. "They are timber-smugglers and they also harass the villagers and try to buy up the cane baskets that they weave."

"I would like to give that lanky creep a sock in the jaw if I see him again," muttered Dilip. "I think he has given me a loose tooth."

It was almost six in the evening when they reached the well. "We have reached," said Smita, pointing. "Come on, let us meet Vinay. He will be waiting."

The children broke into a run, shouting, "Vinay ! Vinay !" Subba cantered after them while Chow yelped with excitement and followed behind.

Smita knew at once that something was wrong, when she saw the pale, drawn faces of the village folk. Kariya drew circles on the ground with his toes, and did not look up.

"Where is Vinay?" asked Smita, her voice faltering.

One of the men walked up to Chenna and waited till they had lowered the stretcher to the ground. "The *babus* came about an hour after you left," he said. "They forced us to give all the baskets and paid a pittance as usual. The boy, he was very brave. He tried to stop them. They beat him, tied his hands and feet and took him away." His voice broke and she wiped the tears in his eyes.

"Where did they go?" asked Chenna.

"We don't know. They put him in the jeep with the baskets and drove away."

Viji was unable to control her tears. Laila who could never bear to see anyone cry, sobbed her heart out.

"Tell us, what do you know about these men?" asked Dilip. "Where do they come from?"

"We only know they are wicked men who come to cheat us villagers," said Chenna unhappily. "They also cut down trees and take them in lorries at night."

"Do you know where they stay?"

"We know nothing," said Chenna, shaking his head. "It is a great sorrow to us that you came for shelter and we could not protect you. It is terrible, terrible," he groaned.

"You could not help it," said Viji. "We have no time to linger now. Let us take Uncle to the main road and wait. Once we get him to the hospital, we can look for Vinay."

The sun had begun to set when they left the village. They bade a hasty goodbye to Karpi, Kariya and the



others and set off down a zig-zag footpath with the four men shouldering the stretcher. Dilip walked ahead with a torch and Viji followed at the back with a lantern. Their progress was slow because of the darkness. By the time they reached the main road, it was pitch dark.

They stood there and waited. About an hour later, when all talking had ceased to a weary silence, the blinding lights of a vehicle approached them. They rushed to the middle of the road waving and shouting, "STOP ! STOP !"

The lights dipped and the vehicle came to a halt. It was an army truck. An angry face with a pencil-sharp moustache peered out of the window. The man wore an army officer's uniform.

"What is the meaning of this ?" he thundered. Seeing the stretcher, he opened the door and stepped out.

"It is our uncle, he is injured," said Viji, her words tripping over in haste. "Please take us to Dalitpur. He has to be seen by a doctor."

The officer knelt beside the stretcher and looked at the still figure in the light of the lantern that Viji held. He stared in surprise and shook his head. "I don't believe it ! Give me that torch." He grabbed the torch from Dilip and looked again.

"Why, it is Capt. Devendranath !"

"Yes, sir."

"Raman !" he bellowed to the driver. "Come here quick, it is Capt. Devendranath !" He looked closely at the Captain and felt his pulse. "He is bad. Real bad. How long is it ? What happened?"

"He fell into a pit on Saturday night in the forest," explained Dilip. "He was awake till Sunday morning and then became unconscious."

"A pit...in a forest..." mumbled the officer perplexed. "Wait. Let us get him inside the truck and move on to Dalitpur. You can tell me everything as we go along." He noticed the tattered clothes of the children and their tired, worried faces. "My word, what a sight," he said, smiling. "I am Major Razdan of the Fourth Guards. The same battallion as Capt. Dev here. Know him well. Come on kids, in you go."

The men lifted the stretcher into the back of the truck. Smita, Soorie and Laila climbed in with Chow. Viji and Dilip sat in front. They thanked Chenna and the other villagers and promised to get in touch with them again. As she folded her hands in *namaste* to Chenna, Smita knew that he too was very worried about Vinay. "We shall let you know everything," she said.

Maj. Razdan listened attentively as Dilip and then Viji related everything that had happened since they left their homes on Saturday morning. When he had heard them through, he sighed so deep and long that his moustache quivered like a bowstring.

"You, kids, have been terrific," he said. "Your parents will be proud of you. By the way, when do they expect you all home?"

"We were to have reached home by noon today," said Viji, suddenly remembering. "Gosh ! they'll be terribly worried, won't they?"

"About this brother of yours who is missing," said the Major, pretending not to have noticed the tears in Viji's eyes, "we will get in touch with the police as soon as we have taken Dev to hospital. We have no clue whatsoever about the men. What a night it is going to be !"

Maj. Razdan was trying hard not to let the anxiety show on his face. The kids had been through a nerve-racking ordeal and they had all shown tremendous courage. But how long could they bear the fearful strain of it all ? Would the missing boy be found ? Would Capt. Dev receive medical help in time ? The questions burned in his mind but he tried to keep a calm front.

"We can describe the men to the police," said Dilip, intruding into his thoughts. "We found out that they were the same men who tried to bully us yesterday in the forest. We begged them to take our uncle to the hospital but they refused."

"You better tell it all to the police officer," said Maj. Razdan. "We are nearing Dalitpur now. Head for the hospital, Raman," he said to the driver, who sat motionless as a statue in his seat.

Dalitpur was a fairly big town. They could see that from the thousands of lights that flickered in the dark. The truck drove into the town and headed for the hospital.

They parked near the Emergency Ward. "Wait here," said Maj. Razdan, hurrying inside. Dilip stood by feeling vaguely disappointed that he was no more the leader. The Major had taken charge.

Capt. Dev was lifted onto the hospital stretcher and wheeled into the Emergency Ward where two nurses and a lady doctor were waiting. The doctor questioned Maj. Razdan and then examined the Captain carefully. The others stood outside and waited.

At last the doctor came out and looked at them from one to the other. "It is not good news, I am afraid," she said. "He is in a grave condition. I am calling the surgeon immediately."

Viji struggled to control the fear that overwhelmed her. "Will he live?" she asked.

"I cannot tell you yet, he has a very slim chance," said the doctor. "It looks as if he has a blood clot in the skull which is pressing on his brain. Our surgeon will decide if he needs an operation and may call a specialist. The leg will be all right," she smiled brightly at them. "You, children, have saved his leg by splinting it properly," she turned to Maj. Razdan and they continued to talk in low tones.

Viji thought the world would end, she felt so miserable. Uncle so ill and Vinay missing! When would their trials end? How would she bear up with it all?

She looked up to see Dilip patting her arm. "Hey Viji, you are really smart," he said admiringly. "You said about that blood clot pressing on the brain, didn't you? Fancy that!"

Together again

Fifteen minutes to eight. Monday evening. The atmosphere at Dr. Chandra's home was tense. The parents of the six children had gathered there to try and find out about the missing kids.

Soorie's father, Mr. Sampath, drummed his fingers impatiently on the arm of his chair. It was the only sound that broke the silence in the drawing room. Mrs. Parekh wiped the sweat from her nose and glanced nervously at her watch. It was impossible for her not to think of her daughter Smita, although her husband had told her a dozen times that worrying would get her nowhere.

The shrill jangle of the telephone broke into their thoughts. Seven adults sat up on their seats while Dr. Chandra sprang towards the telephone. He listened for a few moments, muttered, "Thank you, officer," and replaced the receiver.

"Our police have made contact with Dalitpur Police Station," he said, trying to keep the anxiety out of his voice. "They have had no news. They got in touch with the hospital too. No luck."

Silence pervaded the room once more until the clock boomed eight times to bring in the hour. It seemed to shake them out of their stupor.

"We cannot sit here all night and wait for something to happen," said Dilip and Laila's father, Mr. Gonsalves, unfolding his tall frame from the chair. "I suggest that we ourselves go to Panali—heaven knows, they may be in need of help right now."

Everyone agreed. It would be a relief to do something instead of sitting around.

"It will bring my Fiat," said Mr. Parekh, heading for the door. "Tank is full, I topped her up this morning."

The telephone rang once more and Dr. Chandra reached for it eagerly. All eyes were on him as he stood listening. They could guess nothing from his face except that there was some news this time. At last he kept the receiver down and faced them.

"The children are safe. They're at Dalitpur hospital."

"Hospital?"

"There's been some sort of an accident. Dev is injured. He is serious."

"What is wrong with him? Did they give any details?"

Dr. Chandra sat down, as if he was suddenly weak in the legs. "Serious head injury," he said, looking at his wife. "The surgeon wants me to go and help with the operation."

"The children..."

"The accident happened on Saturday," he went on. "For two days, the kids have been on their own." He raised a weary hand over his eyes. "They will be exhausted. They will need us now. Let us get going."

"Are *all* the children safe?" It was his wife.

The question seemed to hang in the air for a long time. Dr. Chandra slowly walked up to her and took her hand. "Vinay... is missing."

At 8.30 p.m., the blue Fiat pulled out of the kerb in front of Dr. Chandra's house, turned left and sped through the town into the highway. Two anxious fathers sat in front and two behind. If they drove non-stop, they would reach by 2 a.m.

* * *

It did not take Vinay long to realise that he would never be able to untie the ropes that bound his hands and feet. He tried to wriggle himself free. The rope cut into his skin but did not loosen. The blinding sun was hot upon his face. He turned to one side and curled himself into a C, half turning his face in the ground. The ground was nothing but dry burnt grass.

God Almighty, where had they dumped him? There was not a tree in sight. All around was dry, arid land. Vinay lay still, too exhausted to move. Sweat had drenched his shirt into a wet rag. It poured down his nose and eyes and caused a terrible itch but he could not scratch.

Whether he fell asleep or became unconscious, Vinay did not know. But it was a blessing, for when he came round, the sun was gone and a faint, cool wind blew through his shirt, like some healing hand. Vinay could feel life seeping back into him. He tried to roll over the edge of the shallow ditch. With supreme effort, he moved inch by inch. In spite of the fact that his arms and legs were tied, he managed to clear the edge and come to the side of the road. A milestone read 'DALITPUR 30 km.' Vinay leaned his weary body against it and waited.

Daylight was fading when he saw a slick red Maruti come speeding along the road. Vinay was frantic lest they should not see him. "STOP ! HELP ! STOP !" he cried as loud as he could.

The car screeched to a halt. A very pretty young woman peered out of the front window.

"Ajit, it is a young boy !" she cried. "His hands and legs are tied with rope. Oh, my goodness !" She opened the door and hurried to his side. A young spectacled man in a grey safari suit slid out of the driver's seat and joined her.

"Who has done this?" he exclaimed, feeling the ropes round Vinay's wrists. "Whoever it is, has been very thorough about it."

"You will find a knife in my pocket to cut it with," said Vinay.

Ajit fished out the knife and cut the ropes swiftly. Vinay stood up on wobbly legs. The ropes had caused weals on his wrists and ankles.

"You have been in the sun a long time, I think," said the young woman, her voice full of concern.

"Ajit, we must take him to hospital."

They helped him into the car. Vinay winced with

pain at each step and was grateful when Asha, the young woman, poured him a glass of lime juice from a flask. "Uh...Thanks. Thanks a million," said Vinay attempting a weak smile. "I have been lying there for hours. At least three or four hours."

The car started and Vinay leaned back wearily, enjoying the smooth comfort of the brand new vehicle. Ajit told him that he and Asha were recently married and setting off on their honeymoon. Then, looking straight ahead, he asked Vinay, "Want to tell us what happened?"

"It is a long story," said Vinay. "On Saturday six of us set off on a camping trip to Panali with Uncle Dev...I am terribly worried about Uncle Dev," he said, when he had finished. "I wonder if they have got him to the hospital."

"Your friends must be as worried about you as you are about them," said Asha. "Once we have reported at the police station, we will go to the hospital."

They reached Dalitpur in half an hour. At the police station it took them longer than they had thought. The Inspector was very kind but very meticulous in the way he questioned Vinay. He wanted a full account of Vinay's encounter with the two men and also a description of each.

When Vinay had finished, the Inspector said, "Wait a minute, I will be right back," and went into another room. He returned a few minutes later and held out two photographs. "Recognise them?"

"They are the men!" said Vinay. "No doubt about it. That is Mr. Beanpole, and this is Fatty."

"Mr. Beanpole is known as Ved Prakash and Fatty is Chandrashekar," said the Inspector, laughing. "Now, you had better get to the hospital for some

treatment and rest. Thank you very much for your help." He paused, leaning back on his chair. "They are seasoned smugglers and we have been after them for a long time. I will contact the police in Darjeeling right away. This time they will not escape."

"Will you let me know if you catch them?" asked Vinay eagerly. "And how about those villagers? They have been forced to sell their cane baskets to those two men for a long time now."

"I will make sure they receive their compensation and I will let you know everything," said the Inspector, noting down Vinay's address. Then he thanked Ajit and his wife Asha. "I wish you both an enjoyable honeymoon and a happy married life," he said warmly. "I am sorry to have held you up for so long."

When Vinay hobbled into hospital, he was sick with anxiety more than anything else. The lady doctor examined him and said that he needed a long rest and dressing for his wounds. The nurse, who undid the dressing on his foot, puckered her nose when she saw the green herbal medicine bound with leaves.

"Really, the things people do," she exclaimed as she cleaned the foot with stinging antiseptic. "You should have had better sense than to bind it with leaves."

"It was done at a village where nothing else was available," explained Vinay. "It really helped me a lot. It took away all the pain."

The nurse looked surprised as she gave him a starchy smile. "Well, that is good, then. May be there is some sense in these village remedies. In any case, the doctor has ordered an injection to protect you against tetanus."

"Do you know if one Capt. Devendranath was admitted here today?" asked Vinay, hardly daring to hope.

"Yes, of course," said the nurse, then turned round in surprise as a black and grey dog leapt into the room and sprang upon Vinay's bed.

"What is this? A dog in the hospital!" screamed the nurse, horrified to see the neat bedclothes being trampled upon by the dog.

"Chow! Hello, Chow!" laughed Vinay as the excited dog licked his face in welcome. He turned towards the nurse and said, "Please excuse him. He doesn't know the hospital rules. Hey, Chow, where are the others?"

Just then Viji rushed into the room followed by Dilip, Smita, Soorie and Laila.

"Vinay! Thank goodness, you are all right!"

"Where did those nasty men take you?"

"What happened?"

The questions tumbled over one another. But Vinay asked, "How is Uncle?"

"Bad," said Viji. "The surgeon has just seen him and says he needs an operation on the brain. They are trying to contact father. He is the nearest neurosurgeon available."

Vinay hobbled out of bed. "Come on, I want to see Uncle."

All is well...

"I have got some news," said Maj. Razdan, as he came into the room which he had arranged for the children in a rest house near the hospital. "I have just managed to contact your parents."

They began talking all at once. Were their parents worried? Were they angry? When would they reach Dalitpur?

"Wait, wait, let me speak," said the Major seating himself on a chair. "They are coming today. Dr. Chandra, Mr. Gonsalves, Mr. Parekh and Mr. Sampath. They are already on their way and should be here sometime during the night."

"Will father operate on Uncle Dev?" asked Vinay.

Maj. Razan nodded. "It seems your father is a well-known neurosurgeon. Dr. Murthy, who is the surgeon, spoke to him over the phone. Your father will come fully prepared for the surgery." His moustache twitched ever so slightly and a look of anxiety crossed his eyes. "It is 9 p.m. now. There hasn't been any change in Dev's condition. Let us wait and pray."

He was silent for a few minutes absorbed in his thoughts. Then he jerked up. "I forgot all about dinner. You kids must be hungry."

"Starving," said Soorie.

"I could do with some food myself," said Maj. Razdan. "Let us go and eat. There is a small restaurant at the end of this road. *Masala dosais, idlies...*"

Five kids and the dog shot out of the room like bullets from a gun and disappeared down the stairs. Vinay hobbled behind shouting: "Hey, wait for me, you greedy lot!"

The mouth-watering smell of *masala dosais* greeted them. They ate hungrily till they were really full. Then they walked back to the rest house and went to their room to wait. Maj. Razdan left them there and returned to the hospital.

Viji took charge. "Soorie and Laila, you better go to sleep," she said.

"Why us?" asked Soorie.

"Because you are the youngest and it is way past your bedtime."

"I am not sleeping," said Soorie, firmly. "I am staying awake till the operation is over."

"So am I," said Laila with a determined toss of her head.

Ten minutes later both Soorie and Laila were fast asleep on their chairs. They had to be shifted onto the beds.

"They are too young to stay awake so long," said Smita, yawning.

When Maj. Razdan peeped in a little after eleven, he found Viji and Smita curled up on one bed. Dilip and Vinay were asleep on the settee—a tangle of arms and legs. They looked comfortable enough, so he decided to leave them as they were. Waiting all night would only make them tired.

The Major sat in a chair, smart and straight as usual. His moustache drooping at the ends was the only indication that he was tired. Within minutes, he too was nodding off.

At 2 a.m. there was a soft knock on the door and the Major woke with a start. The night attendant of the rest house led the four anxious fathers into the room. They saw their children fast asleep in their tattered, messy, mud-stained clothes. The only thing that mattered was that they were safe. Mr. Parekh walked out of the room wiping his eyes; Mr. Gonsalves reached for his hanky. They stood outside the room talking to Maj. Razdan in low tones.

"We know that they are safe, so let them sleep,"

said Dr. Chandra. "I will have to go and decide about the operation."

"How long will it take?" asked Mr. Gonsalves.

"At least two to three hours. Once I have dealt with the head, Dr. Murthy will operate on the leg. Be seeing you," he said and walked down the stairs to the hospital.

Shortly after 4 a.m. Capt. Dev was wheeled into the Operation Room. He was in urgent need of blood transfusion. Mr. Gonsalves and Maj. Razdan were able to give blood since they belonged to the same group. Then there was nothing more to do but go back to the rest house and wait.

The kids woke up at six in the morning. They were overjoyed to see their parents and eager to tell them all about their adventures. But Viji interrupted.

"Is father operating on Uncle Dev now?"

Mr. Gonsalves nodded, looking at his watch. "He has been in there for two hours. Let us get back to the hospital and find out what's happened."

It was a silent, anxious crowd that went to the hospital. At 7.15 a.m. the swing doors of the Operation Room opened and Capt. Dev was wheeled out on a stretcher with tubes and bottles hanging all about him. When Dr. Chandra emerged, he went up to the twins and put his arms around them. Then he explained: "There was a large blood clot pressing on his brain on the right side. We have removed it, and also set the fracture in his leg."

"What are his chances?" asked Mr. Parekh.

"Critical for three days. If he pulls through that time, he has a good chance."

"Thanks to you both," said Mr. Sampath to the two surgeons. "You must be very tired after the long hours."

"If Dev survives, it is thanks mainly to these six youngsters," said Dr. Chandra. He looked very tired but there was an unmistakable gleam of pride in his eyes.

"It is time we had some breakfast," suggested Maj. Razdan. "There is a restaurant here that has already become a hot favourite."

It was a large and noisy group that entered the restaurant. Between mouthfalls of steaming *idlies* and *chutney*, they talked. When the children heard that Maj. Razdan and Mr. Gonsalves had given blood, Laila was alarmed.

"You must be feeling so weak," she said anxiously. "Why don't you lie down and rest?"

"A healthy person can give half a litre of blood without any problem," explained Viji. "It will be produced again by the body in a day or two."

"That is right," said Dr. Chandra. "You are a smart one, Viji."

"I would like to give some blood too," said Vinay. "If Uncle needs more blood, I will give it."

"There is no need, Vinay," said Dr. Chandra. "When you are older, there will be enough opportunities for you to help save someone's life."

The fathers listened in amazement as the details of the adventure in the forest unfolded. It was Vinay who related the events, with the others joining in now and then.

"It was your united effort that got you through in the end," said Dr. Chandra. "If one of you had given in, there would have been problems. We are really proud of you all."

"There is something I would like to add," said Dilip, clearing his throat. "When we realised the

first night that we would have to fend for ourselves without Uncle's help, Vinay and I thought that the three girls would be an added burden on us; that we would have to look after them." He smiled sheepishly at the girls. "But, we soon found out that they were equal to us in everything—perhaps better."

The girls flushed with pride. Viji leaned across the table and grabbed Vinay by his shirt. "Did you really think we needed looking after, you...you...."

"There will be enough time for arguments on your way back", said their father, as he stood up. "You will be going home now in Mr. Parekh's car. The rest of us will return tomorrow."

They first went back to the hospital to see Capt. Dev. They stood outside the ward as Dr. Chandra looked him over and talked to the nurse on duty.

"He is holding on in true military style," he said, joining the others. "He has got a grim fight ahead and we are doing everything we can. Now you better get started," he told the kids. "There are four worried mothers waiting at home."

When they came out, they saw the police jeep parked next to Mr. Parekh's car. The Inspector came out and spoke to Vinay. "Beanpole and Fatty did not make it to Darjeeling," he said. "They were arrested a few hours ago."

"Thanks for letting us know," said Vinay. "I hope you won't forget the villagers."

"No, I won't," said the Inspector. "They will get their fair share of profit for the baskets from now on."

It was a tight squeeze in the Fiat. They set off on the long drive home after wishing goodbye to Maj. Razdan. "I will stop at the village on the way back this evening, and give them all the news," he said.

Two weeks later, Viji and Vinay had just returned from school when their mother called out, "Letter for you kids. Guess who?"

"Uncle Dev!" they shrieked as they slid off their bikes and ran in to tussle for the letter.

My dear Fellow Campers,

I write this propped up in bed and well on my way to recovery. I have roamed through the hospital in a wheelchair. The doctors tell me I will be discharged in a few days. Then I am coming over for a few weeks rest.

Thanks to each and everyone of you,

Yours affectionately,
Uncle Dev

P.S.

Don't tell your parents, but we will plan ahead for the camping trip next year.

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